





**THE SAME AUTHOR**

**YOUNG WOODLEY. A NOVEL**

**PLAYS**

**CHANCE ACQUAINTANCE**

**YOUNG WOODLEY**

**THE RETURN OF THE SOLDIER**

(From the Novel by Rebecca West)

**DIVERSION**

**AFTER ALL**

# A WOMAN ON HER WAY

by

JOHN VAN DRUTEN

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To  
AURIOL

*The title of this novel was suggested  
by two lines in "Assault," a poem by  
EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY, to whom the  
author makes grateful acknowledgment.*

## PART I



# A WOMAN ON HER WAY

## I

IT pleased Nancy to walk into Claridge's beside Richard Gilchrist. She had met him in Grosvenor Street outside the little bag-shop where she had been haggling for the last half-hour, and, after looking him over cautiously to be quite sure that he was sober, had asked him to take her out to tea.

She had never seen him drunk herself; never to be sure, that was; but everyone said that he had taken to drinking, and there had been a night a couple of months ago when Elinor had brought him to dinner and he had sat moodily silent in a sort of fierce gloom, with his eyes slightly bloodshot, his skin a little muddy, and a loose, dragging effect about his mouth which had made Sam ask, after he had gone, what Elinor wanted to bring that drunken swine there for.

It was the fault of his wife, of course, whom he so ridiculously adored—the cool, remote, beautiful wife whose indifference drove him to drink; at least, so the story went, the story she had heard from Cynthia and Hermione and Winkie, who seemed to know all about it. So, as a matter of fact, did everyone else, and they discussed it as they discussed everyone's private affairs. Even Brenda, the wife herself, had not been reticent, but had talked, revealing the secrets of the bed-chamber, which was how the thing had become public property. The rumour had also gone around that Brenda had taken a lover, but that was less certain. Winkie said that she had, but on little authority, and there was no corroborative evidence, certainly not from Richard who, even if he knew, would be the last person to talk, especially to them. Richard was difficult,

and made these women feel uncomfortable; they disliked him because of his aloofness, because they could never call him Dick, or darling, because there was something about him which made even Winkie's habitual "my sweet" stick in her throat. He would not go to their houses if he could possibly help it, and Nancy had felt it something of a triumph to have got Elinor to bring him to dinner, just as she felt it a triumph to be having tea with him now at Claridge's.

Nancy did not know a great many people, and she wanted to. She fastened on to other people's friends, and especially to Elinor's, with a desperate tenacity. Whenever Elinor declined an invitation on the ground that she was going out with someone else, Nancy always said: "Bring them here instead." Good-naturedly, Elinor very often did. From then on, they became Nancy's friends, if they were of the kind who could be held with good food, and the bright, vapid conversation of which she was beginning to learn the knack, and the various advantages that Sam's money could buy.

Nancy and Sam Rossiter lived in Lowndes Street. Sam was a provision merchant in the City, dark and stoutish, florid and jovial, and a little too fond of talking about money; boasting, for example, of how his trip to Australia two years ago had cost him a thousand pounds, although he had only been away three months. His father and mother had been common, although kind, and Nancy had been a little relieved when they died and there was no longer any danger of their dropping in of an evening to make a friendly, but frequently inopportune call. Nancy, herself, had been born in Newcastle, the daughter of a small solicitor, and she had been married to Sam for twenty years. Old Rossiter's death had made them wealthy, enabling them to take their large, rich, slightly vulgar house, and to send their boy to a public school.

Nancy at forty was small and plump, and curiously prettier than she had ever been as a girl; a good wife and a good mother, still genuinely and naively pleased at compliments along the lines of: "No one would

ever believe you had a boy of seventeen, Mrs. Rossiter." But since Derek had gone to Uppingham, and Sam was in the city all day, making more and more money<sup>o</sup> that was spent on food and wine, and servants, including a French maid, and on furs and jewels and violently expensive clothes for Nancy, she had begun of late to find herself rather lonely. She had no friends but the wives of Sam's business associates, who were, for the most part, large, showy women with whom she had nothing in common. Nancy was fastidious, or, rather, would have liked to be. She read a great deal, went to every new play, and heard all the latest music, so that she might have something to talk about to really interesting people if she should ever meet them. She wanted to know people; people who had done things, celebrated people whose names were in the papers, people who moved in that gay, smart, clever world which, for all Sam's money, it seemed that she could never penetrate. At first nights, sitting beside Sam in their stalls, wearing her ermine cloak and Reville frock, hung with Sam's diamonds and emeralds, Nancy would look longingly at all the people whom she knew so well by sight and name; authors, actors, painters, politicians, smart society hostesses, all the regular first-night crowd, exchanging greetings and comments with each other, and feel sick with envy in her moneyed isolation.

And then, five years ago, at Cannes, she had met Elinor, gay, restless and vivacious, looking then a good deal less than her thirty-five years, met and talked with her in the lounge of their hotel, asked her to dine with them that night, and gone upstairs to dress, thrilled with the excitement of entertaining a novelist at dinner. Sam was not so impressed. He did not read, and the name of Elinor Johnson meant nothing to him, but he could see that Nancy was pleased, so he grinned tolerantly and was laboriously and vulgarly jovial to Elinor at dinner. With a desperate effort Nancy made Elinor like her; something in the almost childlike eagerness with which she warmed her hands at Elinor's



glow, the naive pleasure she took in asking questions about the great whom she had known—and she seemed to have met almost everyone worth knowing—struck Elinor as pathetic and appealing. She responded to the little girl quality in Nancy; kept up a friendship with her when they returned to London; introduced her to her friends. Nancy put all her energy into trying to annex them for herself, and was not eminently successful. Too many of them eluded her, put off by her obvious strained eagerness, which was apt to be embarrassing, and, as a result, her parties tended to become a matter of everyone meeting their own friends—a fact which had made Hermione say that Nancy's invitations ought to bear a crest with the words: "How small the world is!" Hermione, herself, made use of Nancy, borrowing her house for entertainments, seeing her when she had nothing better to do, and then dropping her for long periods when she was more profitably occupied. Nancy was not unaware of this, just as she was not unaware that Cynthia, who was Elinor's sister-in-law, only invited her to her second-best dinner-parties; but she solaced herself with the reflection that they were willing now and then to come to lunch and indulge in gossip and tittle-tattle, to discuss Elinor together and run her down, deploring her ramshackle life, her carelessness and untidiness, and the general incoherence of her existence. At least they included her in that, and Nancy, who needed but little encouragement once she was started on anything, found herself adopting their tone, starting sentences, as they did, with: "Isn't it a pity how Elinor . . ." and copying them ultimately, even, in deploring Elinor to her face, forgetting that they, at least, had known her twenty years, forgetting everything in her anxiety to be one of them, hopeful only that this might, at last, be the way to popularity.

It was along these lines that she talked to Richard this afternoon at tea. She knew him only slightly, had little common ground for conversation with him, and so it was that she began:

"Have you seen Elinor lately?"

"Not for a week or two," Richard answered.

"She isn't looking well," Nancy commented. "But, of course, it's the life she leads. Always racketing about, always doing a dozen different things at once. I never knew anyone so incapable of doing one thing at a time as she is."

"I think Elinor's all right," Richard said, shortly.

"All right? Oh yes, of course she is. But I mean it's all so . . . so silly and pointless, the way she lives. She doesn't take care of herself. She doesn't bother. I suppose you'll think I'm being horrid and catty and disloyal, but I'm not, really I'm not. I'm devoted to Elinor. We all are." It gave Nancy pleasure to say "we." "That's just why I think it's such a pity. I mean, look at the way she dresses."

"How?" Richard knew perfectly well what she meant, but he would give her no help in this.

"Well . . . she has nice things, of course, I know she has. Sometimes. But she doesn't look after them. She doesn't keep them properly. She doesn't care. I can talk to you about it, because you're a friend of hers. Everybody who's fond of her will tell you the same thing. Her own sister-in-law is always talking about it. It really is a disgrace the way she looks, and it's so silly, because there's no need for it. And her flat. It's a perfectly dreadful place. She really ought to live somewhere better than that."

"Don't you think the question of money might have something to do with it?" Richard asked. "I don't imagine Elinor's terribly well off."

"She's not rich," Nancy said judicially. "I know that. But it's a question of management, that's all." This was all very well for Nancy with her twelve thousand a year. "I mean, she doesn't know how to spend. Cynthia said the most divine thing about her the other day. She said Elinor was the kind of woman who would always wear five-guinea shoes with a four-and-eleven-penny hat. It's so true. It describes her exactly. How much *does* she make out of her books? Do you know?"

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Richard answered. “I’m not awfully in the habit of asking my friends how much money they make.”

“Oh, that’s a snub, I suppose,” Nancy said jauntily, and then her face grew suddenly pathetic. She didn’t want to offend Richard. She didn’t want him to think badly of her. “Please don’t misunderstand me,” she begged. “I’m not just being curious or inquisitive. But, as I say, I’m fond of Elinor, and I hate to see her living like this.”

“Why not tell her so yourself, then?” Richard asked.

“I’ve said all I dare,” Nancy said. “I don’t feel I know her well enough to really talk to her, but I thought you . . . you’re an old friend of hers, aren’t you? You’ve known her longer than almost any of us.”

Richard smiled, not too good-naturedly.

“I think my friendship with Elinor has been based pretty much on the fact that we neither of us imagine it gives us the right to judge each other’s lives.”

“But don’t you think that that’s a friend’s privilege?” Nancy queried. “Don’t you think the whole point of friendship is that you *can* tell someone things?” Richard looked at her steadily and she became confused, began to stammer, growing more and more involved in her attempt to explain that surely a friend has the right, the duty almost, to tell you things that he sees about you that you can’t see for yourself; that it is just because he *is* your friend, and fond of you, that he would want you to be . . . well, the way he thinks you ought to be; that if you see someone you are fond of doing something you think is a pity, surely you ought to tell them, for their good. . . .

“Oh, I know I don’t express myself properly. I’m not clever, like all you people . . . but, after all, friendship . . .”

She broke off in embarrassment, floundering badly. She had never talked to Richard like this before. She could well imagine that he would resent criticism; and could ill conceive that anyone would be able to talk

to him about himself, about his drinking, for example. Elinor wouldn't, she knew. But that would not be because she did not dare; it would be on account of that queer code of hers which made her regard it as an impertinence—the code which was responsible, presumably, for her crowd of strange friends whose irregularities she accepted with so little question. Elinor knew all about Richard's drinking, knew more about him, probably, than the rest of them, but she accepted it and did not talk about it, as Nancy could never have accepted a fault in a friend. Elinor was like that.

Nancy was a little jealous of Elinor's friendship with Richard, because she knew it to be an unromantic one, which seemed to her all wrong. Elinor had had affairs with a number of men—at least, people said she had—and it seemed so extraordinary that Richard, who, after all, was really very attractive, should never have entered into her life at all in that way. "In that way" was Nancy's method of expressing it. It seemed to her such a waste of opportunity, so curious, and yet so like Elinor, to ignore Richard, who was dark and queerly handsome and rather exciting, in the way that lovers ought to be, and to have taken up with the odd assortment of unlikely men whom Nancy guessed rather than knew to have been her lovers. But Elinor was notoriously a bad picker. Not that Richard would have been much good to her, a man of nearly forty, who behaved like a schoolboy about his wife, and drank and sulked because she would have none of him and only let him sleep with her once a month, and then as a sort of bored favour (so Cynthia reported), but at least he would have made a good lover, while it lasted.

Nancy would have liked the chance to be romantic about Richard herself, or rather would have liked Richard to be romantic about her. Nancy was strictly virtuous, and had never in the twenty years of her married life dreamed of being unfaithful to Sam, but she developed periodic sentimental crushes over men which she indulged no further than schoolgirl reveries in the privacy of her over-furnished boudoir. So, of

late, had she often dreamed of Richard, as when a good deal younger she had dreamed of Gerald du Maurier.

But it went no further than dreaming. She had married Sam, and she had no desire to be unfaithful to him. He was a good husband and was kind and indulgent to her; in any case Nancy was not passionate. Her standards for others, however, had changed considerably since the Newcastle days of provincial simplicity. She realised now that she had come into a world where people looked on things differently from the way in which she had been brought up to regard the virtues and the vices.

She could not work it out for herself; too anxious to be liked, more anxious still to know people whether she liked them or not, she had committed herself, by desire, at any rate, to this attractive semi-fashionable world, where no two people had the same ideas of right and of wrong, where a deploring tolerance that shrugged its shoulders was the general attitude, where everyone did as they pleased with their own lives, and nobody was shocked by anything, and nobody seemed to approve of anyone. It was true that the result had been to admit her to a circle of acquaintances and to exclude her almost entirely from friendship; but this, too, seemed to be the normal order among the women she knew.

"I suppose you wouldn't come and dine with us one night," she said, as she drew on her gloves, "just you and your wife? I'll get Elinor to come, too. Then we might all go and dance somewhere. I awfully want to hear that American man at the Arctic Circle. They say he's perfectly incredible . . . much dirtier than he was last year."

Nancy had developed a taste for witty obscenity, and not always witty at that, which she had found to be popular in the set in which she wanted to move.

"Do let's," she went on now, "make up a really jolly party. We won't take Sam. He doesn't care for night-clubs anyway, and he'd be sure to get shocked and spoil all the fun. But we'll get Elinor to bring a couple of nice boy friends, and if you and your wife

will come too, we can have any amount of fun. Just let me know any time that suits you, and I'll get hold of Elinor."

"That's very nice of you," said Richard, pontely, "but as a matter of fact . . . I'm not going out very much just now." He paused a moment, looked away from her, and then went on with an ugly smile. "And apparently you haven't heard, which I must say astonishes me, that Brenda and I are not living together any more. I don't suppose it surprises you."

The malice and the bitterness with which he spoke were a protection for his own hurt, born of a desire which was the most typical thing about him, to wound himself and to display the wound before anyone else could aim their knives at it. He saw now that Nancy was hurt by the way in which he spoke, that the nice thing in her, the little girl who kept peeping through her riches and her sophistication, was puckering up her face as though at a cruel snub, while the other Nancy was doing her best to assume a mask of worldly sympathy and understanding. He was sorry for the little girl in her; he had spoken as he did to hurt himself, not her.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she murmured, put out a hand and then drew it back timidly.

Richard shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a good story," he said. Once again he could not resist the desire to stab himself, knowing only too well what an excellent story it would make for these women.

"What do you mean?"

"That's what other people's misfortunes are, surely. Either bores or good stories, that's all."

"Isn't that very bitter?" Nancy asked gently.

"Is it? Don't you find people are bores when they come asking you for sympathy?"

"That depends how fond of them I am. It doesn't bore me with you. It makes me very sorry." She laid her gloved hand on the gilt arm of his chair, and her eyes grew wistful, inviting him to confidence.

"But then *I'm not* asking for sympathy. I'm only telling you why we can't dine with you," he snubbed her, but she ignored it.

"Why not ask for it, then?" she said, gently. "You would have it, you know."

"I wonder," he answered, smiling a little, and then shook himself. "But anyway, I don't want it. So it doesn't matter, thank you all the same."

"If you feel like that about it . . ." Nancy recovered herself with a little laugh.

"I'm afraid I do."

"Well, you can't prevent me being sorry, even if you don't want me to be. Perhaps you'll remember that. And if you're lonely, any time you care to come round I shall be delighted to see you. I'm always in at cocktail time."

She began collecting her things. "Perhaps you'd come and dine quietly by yourself one night? Where are you living? Where can I get hold of you? Still . . ." She stopped, afraid to ask which of them had moved out of their house, though her brain was busy with the corroboration that this seemed to offer to the story of Brenda's infidelity.

"I'm at my Club at the moment," he said, "but I'm hoping to go into a flat quite soon. I think I've found one."

"Then send me your address," she said, gaily, "or I suppose Elinor will know it. I'll ask her." And then added: "I wish you could persuade *her* to move."

"Are you suggesting we live together?"

"I wasn't," Nancy laughed, "but I can think of worse arrangements."

"For her?" Richard asked bitterly.

"Why not? You're quite attractive, you know." She was flirting with him again.

"Thank you." He bowed.

"You know, you two ought to have married," Nancy ventured, as she rose.

"God forbid!" Richard laughed. "I didn't know you wished her that much harm."

"You're incorrigible!" Nancy said, with a gesture that was the equivalent of hitting him playfully with her fan.

"Well, that saves bother." He took her to the door.

"Can I give you a lift?" she asked, as he put her into her car. "I'm going home. I like to be there when Sam gets back."

"No, thanks. I'm walking."

"Well, thank you for a very nice tea." She held out her hand, and pressed his sympathetically as he took it.

"Even though you didn't eat any?"

"One must keep the schoolgirl figure, somehow! Home, Binney. Good-bye, and thank you so much."

The Daimler drove off, and Richard began to walk along Brook Street towards the park. It was a damp, chilly afternoon of February, which had no hint of spring. The trees were bare and dripping, and a raw, foggy twilight hung clammily, deepening and chilling him as he struck across the muddy grass towards Kensington. There were few people about. It was a doleful afternoon that beset him with loneliness, with the desire for a warm, fire-lit room, his own room, the studio of that house which now he might no longer call his home, where Brenda moved alone in the setting that he had made for her, for both of them to be happy in together. He thought of how he would have spent this afternoon, seated on a stool before the fire, leaning back as he watched her, and eating tea from the low, round lacquer table—a tea that was a prelude to a long, comfortable, happy time in the half-dark room before dinner, instead of a tea taken as he had taken it this afternoon, with a stranger in the loud unfriendliness of an hotel, with any atmosphere that the intimacy of the meal might have bred, broken and dispelled by the paying of a bill and the rush of the swing-doors at the entrance.

He did not know where he was going. He felt a sudden drenching desire for companionship, companionship in a room that was lived in, that bore the stamp of a personality that he loved, a room where all



the material things were symbols of the spiritual thing that he knew and cherished in its owner. As he thought of this he was shocked suddenly by his lack of friends. His marriage had left him friendless, save for the party friends, willing enough to lunch or dine or dance or crowd the studio to hear music, but useless to come near to him in spirit. In his desire to draw close to Brenda he had discarded heedlessly all other intimacies. He had two friends only. He had never been of the type to whom friendship can be born of the moment; to him it meant that slow, comfortable growth that comes with the years, that has its roots embedded low, twined round incidents so trivial and so deeply buried in the past as to be almost forgotten. Such were his friendships with Bill and with Elinor, and they were the only two human beings to whom he could turn this afternoon. But Bill was in the city, working until six o'clock, when he would return to his St. John's Wood home, with wife and children and dog, where Richard seldom intruded; for Bill had achieved in marriage an honest, bourgeois domesticity which went ill with the bohemianism and the shallow elegance of the life that he, himself, had made with Brenda, and that now had shattered.

His thoughts turned to Elinor, whose life was like an old familiar trunk, where she stored away every oddment of amusement or interest that life washed up on its daily tide. He had known her twenty years, with long intervals when he did not see her; but those intervals had mattered nothing in their friendship, which had remained a thing of the completest confidence, of mutual trust and respect, despite everything that each knew was regrettable in the other; of laughter at themselves and at each other; and of the warm carelessness that one has over a permanent possession of which one is fond and sees no likelihood of losing, like a table or a favourite chair, which, for all that it may go into storage, will come out as companionable and as solid as ever.

It was Elinor he wanted to see this afternoon, and he was walking in the direction of her little Mews flat in Kensington, the flat that Nancy and the others so

deplored. It was unlikely that she would be at home or, if she were, that she would be alone; but he felt so great a need for her and for her gay generosity this sad, chilly afternoon that he would go there and wait for her if she were out, or sit and outstay her other guests if she were not alone. He hoped there would be no other guests, for he disliked her friends, who, like everything else in her life, had no homogeneity, save in the irritation that they produced in him.

If, as he had not infrequently done, he protested against them, she explained them, not in the least apologetically, on the ground of having known them all her life, which, though true, did not seem to him an adequate reason for allowing them so to clutter her present existence. But Elinor's existence, like her flat, was always cluttered with people, objects and occupations which she meant one day to sort according to their relative degrees of importance. She had been and done so many things since he had first known her, quite apart from the producing of sixteen perfectly readable novels; it seemed to him that there was scarcely a street in West-end London which did not bear the memory of some shop in which she had been interested, some little gallery she had helped to run, or some drain down which she had flung a portion of her capital or energy at some time or other, and from which the sewage (although she never recognised it as such) kept drifting back into her life.

And, in the moment of thinking this, he realised, too, that to the rest he, himself, would appear no different from the way in which he saw them: just a moody, embittered drunk and wastrel whom Elinor had known all her life, who would be found now and then sitting among the litter of her clothes and papers and other people's canvases and manuscripts, on the divan in her flat; sitting with a glass of whisky in his hand and wishing quite obviously, from the expression on his face, that the rest would go. The only difference between them and himself was that they, for the most part, were promiscuously gregarious, willing to include

any stranger, even himself, either in their chattering, or in the argumentative recitals of the emotional disturbances of their lives, whilst he quite frankly hated humanity.

He made his way now to her flat, which was on the first floor over a garage in Marrable Mews, hard by South Kensington Station. The door, which was flanked by two dust-bins (the one from which several *Times Literary Supplements* protruded, proclaiming itself thereby to be Elinor's), was opened him by her daily servant, Mrs. Moggridge, a stout, matronly woman with a forbidding expression, who was very seldom heard to speak. She opened the door to Richard with a surly: "Yes, she's in," in answer to his unspoken enquiry, and followed him up the stairs, announcing, as she pushed open the door: "There's a gentleman for you, Miss," as though he were a parcel, and then lumbered past him to her kitchen, off the sitting-room, where she slammed the door on herself.

Elinor rose from the floor to greet him.

## II

SHE had been lying full length on her stomach on a pile of cushions, waving her stockinged feet, running her hands through her hair and scratching her head, while she dictated to a secretary, who sat hitting a typewriter at a table across the room.

The secretary was Angela Lane, called Angie, a small child of twenty, with hair the colour of stewed apples and large, wide, blue saucers of eyes. Behind her back she was known to Elinor and her friends as "Little Uplift," on account of the nobility of her ideals and her gentle efforts to impose them on Elinor's work. At the time of her arrival, a novel was in progress in which the heroine was destined, according to the story Elinor told afterwards, to have three affairs; when it appeared in the Press she remained triumphantly a virgin to the end. "Angie will save more women than any church worker," Elinor said, "but God knows what she'll do to my work." She was a scrupulous and tireless little secretary, conscientious to the point of exasperation, and she adored Elinor, though with misgiving, timidly mothering her, and mending her underclothes for her on the sly. Her main difficulty and trouble in life, apart from adjusting her standards of morals to her employer's, was in deciphering Elinor's handwriting, and in piecing together the scraps of paper torn from pads and exercise-books, the backs of envelopes and bills, theatre programmes and other people's letters, on which Elinor wrote her work. Angie would arrive sometimes in the morning to find Elinor already out, and on her typewriter a little pile of odd sheets of paper scrawled to the point of illegibility, unnumbered and frequently quite out of order, on which Elinor had written the last thousand words or so of her current

novel during the night, or, to judge from the handwriting, during a long and extremely uncomfortable taxi drive.

It was a mystery to Angie how those properly printed and bound volumes, ninety thousand words and more, without a single misprint, ever came from that miscellaneous heap of scrap paper which, for all that Elinor begged her to do so, she obstinately refused to destroy until after the final correction of page proofs, keeping them neatly numbered and held together with a rubber band in a box that had once contained soap. Angie could never destroy a box or a piece of string; she had a mania for things that might come in useful one day.

She suspended her hands now, as Elinor leaped up and hurled herself at Richard.

"Dick, my sausage!" Elinor cried, "come in. You know Angie, don't you?"

"How do you do?" Richard went over and shook hands with Angie, who blushed. "Working?" he asked. "Am I disturbing you?"

"It doesn't matter," Elinor said. "It's almost Angie's bedtime, anyway."

"Do you go to bed at half-past five?" Richard asked.

"That's Miss Johnson's joke," Angie explained. "I'm supposed to go then. That's what she means. But I'll be very pleased to stay on if you want to get this finished," she added to Elinor.

"To-morrow will do," Elinor answered, and then remembered something. "'Strewth! Oh, I'm sorry, Angie, I forgot. You don't like me to say that, do you? You think it's profane."

"It's not kind of you to make fun of me," Angie protested.

"I'm not making fun of you. Perhaps you're right. Perhaps it is unladylike. Anyway, what I meant to say was that I shan't have a minute to-morrow. There are all sorts of bits and pieces that I've got to do. Well, I shall just have to write it overnight, that's all, and leave it for you when you come in the morning."

"What are you on?" Richard asked.

"Short story for the *Wicked World*. Five thousand words. Got to be in the day after to-morrow. I'm dictating it to save time, and it's putrid. I can't write; I don't know why anybody ever thought I could. You think it's rotten, too, don't you, Angie?"

"I never said so," the secretary faltered.

"But you don't think it's worthy of me, eh?"

"I don't think it's as good as you *have* done," Angie ventured.

"Angie's got such a high standard of my work, Richard," Elinor laughed, "that if I listened to her I'd never let anything go out at all. She thinks I've never written anything as good as my first book. So do most people, as a matter of fact. But never mind, Angie. If you want your wages—salary, I mean—this story's got to go, good or bad. God knows when we're going to get back to Dulcie."

"Who's Dulcie?"

"Our latest heroine. She's been languishing in the fifth chapter on the brink of adultery for the last month."

"Is she going to commit it?" Richard asked.

"That's what Angie and I are arguing about. I think she should, but Angie says not before page two hundred. And that's a concession! You can pack up, lovey." The telephone rang. "Oh, damn, answer it! It's been doing that all day," she explained to Richard.

Angie answered the 'phone, and then put her hand over the mouthpiece.

"It's your husband," she whispered, melodramatically.

"Your what?" Richard asked in astonishment.

"Only Roly," Elinor explained. "My ex. The same old one."

"Does he often ring you up?"

"Lord, yes, about once a fortnight. He's lost without me. All right, I'll come." She snatched up the instrument. "How's my Roly?" she sang, and proceeded to talk for ten minutes, while Angie crept stealthily around the room on tiptoe, putting things away, and Richard sat and listened to Elinor in amusement.

"All right," she said at last. "Let's meet and talk it over, anyway. Ivy on Thursday, at 1.15? Lovely! 'Bye, Angel. All news then." She replaced the receiver.

Richard let off a howl of laughter.

"Elinor, you're marvellous!"

"Why?" she asked, blankly.

"You talk for ten minutes without stopping, and then say 'All news then.'" Elinor chuckled. "What does he want?"

"Wants to arrange about a show at the gallery."

"His show? Your gallery?"

"Yes. Some paintings of Majorca that he's done."

"You're incredible," Richard said.

"Why?" Elinor asked again. "You surely don't expect me to bear malice after all these years, do you? Besides, painting was the one thing Roly and I never quarrelled about."

"Doesn't it shock you," Richard turned to Angie, who was putting on her hat, "to find a woman treating her divorced husband like that?"

"I think Miss Johnson's very nice to him," Angie said.

"There were probably faults on both sides," Elinor mockingly addressed the ceiling. "Oh, Roly's all right. He's grand, so long as you don't have to live with him. Angie's crazy about him. I think she'd like to work a reconciliation."

"Now, Miss Johnson," Angie protested, "you're not to make fun of me. I never said any such thing. But you asked me what I thought of him when he came here, and I told you I couldn't judge meeting him once like that, but I thought he seemed quite nice."

"Angie darling, he is. You've never seen him drunk, that's all."

"I should hope not," Angie said, demurely.

"And I have. Regularly, once a week, for three whole years, and that's enough to warp any woman's judgment. But he's a sweet, and a very fine artist, and I love him. So go home and think about that, and learn the moral of Christian forgiveness."

Angie shook her head, sighed, and put on her coat.

"Well, good-night," she said in a tone of resignation.

"Good-night, Angie," Elinor waved her hand, and Richard opened the door for her as she went out.

"How you do tease that child," he said.

"She loves it," Elinor laughed. "She can't make me out. She's never met anything like me in her life before."

"I should think you're an education for her."

"Poor Angie. She doesn't know whether she's coming or going most of the time. But she thinks I'm a good woman at bottom, in spite of all my funny ways. She said nobody could have written *The Rose Garden* who wasn't fundamentally decent."

"Bloody cheek!" Richard exploded.

"It sounds like it, doesn't it? She once said that my characters had very high principles on a very low plane." Richard laughed. "Oh, the child has wit, in a funny sort of way."

"What did she mean?"

"I think, that they're immoral, but honest about it. That they haven't got her standards, but do appear to have some. That they don't lie more than they can help, and don't like lying even that much."

"In other words, your standards?"

"Perhaps."

There was a pause, and then he said, trying to disguise the thought-link in his mind:

"I've been having tea with the lady of Lowndes Street."

"Nancy? You haven't? How did that happen?"

"I met her in the street, and she said: 'Hello, here's Claridge's, let's go in,'—like Mr. Wemmick."

"What did she have to say?"

"Quite a lot," Richard answered, shortly.

"I'm sure. She's chatty, is Nancy. Did she talk about me?"

"Yes. I wish to God she wouldn't."

"Darling, what else is she to talk about to you?"



You aren't exactly cosy company, you know, especially with that crowd."

"I wonder if you know what they're really like?" Richard said, tentatively.

"Angel," Elinor laughed, "you're not going to tell me she's been running me down, and expect me to be surprised, are you? People are always coming to me confidentially and telling me that they feel I ought to know that Nancy and Cynthia and Hermione aren't loyal, breathing it as a deadly secret, and then getting terribly hurt when I laugh in their faces and tell them that I knew it years ago. Did Nancy have the 'isn't-it-a-pity bird' on her shoulder again to-day?"

"She did, rather. Why do you put up with it?"

"Darling, what does it matter? I know what they are, and the way they talk about me. 'Poor dear Elinor,'" she quoted, "'always trying to do a hundred different things at once, and never doing any of them properly.' But why should I mind? Oh, it gets on my nerves, sometimes, but I'm used to them. And, anyway, I expect they're right. They think they mean it all for the best."

"They don't," said Richard. "It's pure cattiness."

"No," said Elinor firmly. "They really and genuinely do think that I'm wasting my life."

"And what do they want you to do with it?"

"They want me to get on. They think I've no ambition. And I haven't, really; not personal ambition, like they have. That's all Hermione ever thinks about—getting on. That sounds beastly, but it's true. That's why she's so miserable; she's always striving after something. They all are."

"What?" he demanded.

"Oh, social success, and money, and position, and all the other vague things that people do strive after. Everyone round me is striving so hard that it makes me feel tired to watch them. They can't forgive the fact that I don't care . . . enough. Cynthia is always saying that, considering the success with which I started, I

ought to be a lot more important now than I am. Which, from her standpoint, is true."

"Well, I can't stick them," he said angrily. "And I don't believe you really like them, either, in your heart of hearts."

"Darling," she said, a little wearily, "I stopped liking and disliking people years ago. You can't keep it up when you know as many as I do. I like almost everybody, which doesn't mean that they matter, or that they touch my own personal life anywhere. I don't want them to, anyway. I haven't room. I don't believe in these passionate intimacies. I take people as I find them. You're different. You go deeper. You're like Tom, my brother. You belong."

"I'm glad of that," he said, with a smile of affection, and then relinquished the subject. "Have you been working all day?" he asked.

"Yes. The telephone's been going off like a minute gun since nine o'clock this morning, and nearly reduced Angie to tears. Mrs. Moggridge cooked us a chop for lunch, and I went on dictating between mouthfuls while Angie took it down in shorthand on the tablecloth with a fork. Here, you want a drink. Cocktail or a proper one?"

"Proper one. I'll help myself. Don't you move. Are you in a hurry? Going out anywhere? Or can I stop and talk?"

"Do. I've got the evening free."

"How extraordinary!"

"Isn't it? But I just said 'it is my duty and I will.' It's this damned story. Like to stop? I'm going to cook myself some sausages. Lovely little itty-bitty ones. There's enough for two, and there's some Rude-sheimer '21 in the cupboard; bread and cheese to fill in. That any good to you?"

"It sounds marvellous. But don't you want to work?"

"I'll sling you out later. It's ages since we've talked."

"Yes."

He helped himself to a drink, and came and sat on

the divan, while she crouched cross-legged, hugging her knees, on the pile of cushions on the floor.

She was looking more than her age this evening, after a long day's work, with her hair tousled by her fingers, its colour dulled to a plain, dark brown, and its texture matted, instead of lying smooth and neatly waved, with glints of red in it, close to her head. Her face, which she had not powdered all day, looked tired and lined, its cat-like, three-cornered sharpness accentuated. Her eyes, usually large and wide and grey-green, flecked with amber, were half closed now, the lips drooping sleepily. Suddenly she slithered, sprawling, across the cushions, with her head on her arms and her whole body relaxed.

"You're over-tired," he said.

"No," she murmured, "just sleepy. Give me two minutes to shut my eyes, and I shall be all right."

"Go to sleep," he answered.

"Just for five minutes," she nodded.

"Shall I put something over you?"

She shook her head. "I shall be all right. Lovely fire, lovely little doze, and I shall be as right as ninepence."

"Is ninepence right?" he laughed.

"I expect so," she grunted. "Much righter than sixpence, anyway." Her voice trailed off into drowsy indistinctness, and suddenly she was asleep.

He sat and watched her with a warm sense of tenderness at the complete surrender of all her vitality—the vitality that was the most essential thing about her. When she was tired, as she had been just now, her resistance seemed beaten down until she was only a weary being, no longer young, who fought bad health and over-work with a generosity of spirit and a prodigality of energy that were almost pitiable. Now, as she lay asleep, she seemed to have become a girl again, as he had first known her when she was twenty, with her body, which had so amazingly kept its youth and its resilience, yielded to a rest from which, in a few moments, she would rise refreshed, push her hands through her

hair, and become again the swift, gay Elinor that he knew in the quick, chattering, social figure that she presented to the world at large.

Presently Mrs. Moggridge emerged from her kitchen, reluctantly prepared to depart for the night. Richard put his finger to his lips, indicating with his head Elinor's sleeping form on the floor, and the housekeeper made her exit treading heavily on her toes, with elaborate precautions for silence, which she ruined by letting the door slam behind her. Elinor, however, did not wake. Richard rose and tiptoed to the door, which he shut gently to keep it from banging, and then, with a sudden inspiration, went over to the telephone, from which, after a moment's hesitation, he removed the receiver. Then he returned quietly to his seat, where he sat staring into the fire—the fire that for ten months of the year Elinor kept burning sixteen hours out of the twenty-four. The flat was a chill and draughty one, and Elinor hated the cold, spending an absurdly disproportionate amount of money on heating arrangements. Her throat and chest were weak, and from November until April of every year she suffered badly from colds and from bronchitis.

Presently a coal fell into the grate. He bent forward to replace it, and Elinor stirred lazily, stretching herself like a cat.

"What's the time?" she murmured.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "Go to sleep again." She wriggled drowsily in the cushions and lay looking at him.

"How long have I been asleep?" she asked.

"I don't know. About half an hour. It doesn't matter."

"Good Lord!" She pulled herself together. "I didn't mean to be more than five minutes." She rubbed her eyes. "I feel grand now. Do you really mean to say the telephone hasn't rung?"

"It may have been trying to. I took the receiver off."

"Oh, Richard, you darling! Has it been exploding?"

I'd better put it back, though, or the Exchange will have me put in prison, or something. Besides, silly as it is, I *can't* bear to think of who may be fuming at the other end. It's making the most peculiar noises, as it is."

She rose and replaced the receiver. The instrument rang immediately.

"There you are!" She grimaced at Richard.

"Mrs. Anthony," she told him, after a short conversation.

"What, the mother of that girl who's so crazy about you?"

"Yes. I'm crazy about *her*, too. She's another of the very few people I really do care for. She's got that extraordinary quality of real youth that makes you want to cry when you look at it. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I think I do. Does she still write you enormous letters?"

Elinor nodded.

"And do you answer them?"

"I do. I haven't forgotten what it's like to be 'not yet seventeen' myself, and you don't know what a comfort letters are at school. Besides, she's got hold of me in a funny sort of way. She makes me feel responsible for her. Lunch with her mother next Monday. Let me put it down."

She pulled an engagement-pad from under a heap of papers on her desk, and scribbled on it.

"Now let's go and see what's in the larder," she said.

The larder was a tiny cupboard, with wire-netting doors, nailed to the wall of the kitchen, and within easy reach of the gas-fumes.

"You can't possibly keep food in this little place," Richard expostulated. "It's as hot as the devil from the stove, and there's practically no air at all."

"I know," Elinor answered gaily. "It's a pity, isn't it? I don't know what to do about it. If I've got anything that I really want to keep, I put it on my bedroom window-sill, and then the cats get it. I came back the other night and found six of them having a caviare party on the ledge. I'm always meaning to buy

an ice-box or a frigidaire, but they're so damned expensive, and anyway there isn't room in this cubby-hole. The larder holds enough for my simple wants, nine times out of ten. You go and lay the table while I cook, will you? You'll find everything in the drawer of the what-not."

Richard went back to the sitting-room and began to lay the table, while Elinor went on chattering to him through the open kitchen door. The room was large, high, and bright, pleasing and miscellaneous, shabby in a not unattractive way, and almost incredibly untidy. It was filled with a strange assortment of furniture, chosen obviously for comfort rather than for style. The what-not, to which Elinor had referred, was a huge seventeenth-century Dutch cabinet in carved oak; that, a rosewood spinet, badly scratched by the typewriter, which often stood on it, and a couple of Bokhara rugs on the stained-wood floor, were the only good things in the room. For the rest there was a gigantic sofa, like a young village, covered in a faded and torn brown chintz; a backless divan, strewn with cushions of every shape and pattern and wearing a loose brocade cover which was one of Mrs. Moggridge's less successful efforts at upholstery; Elinor's desk, which looked as though it had come out of a city office; a very old, but not antique, gate-legged table, at which Angie worked during the day; and a number of chairs, stools and humpties, all piled high with books, magazines and manuscripts which, however beautifully Angie tidied them before leaving for the night, were bound to be disordered again before morning. The desk, however, was immune from any attempt, even, at order; both Angie and Mrs. Moggridge were forbidden to lay a finger or a duster on its contents, and yet it was very seldom that anything got lost. Elinor had an amazing faculty, that was like a psychic sense, of being able to go in search of a paper which she had not seen for perhaps two or three years, and find it in an old trunk or drawer as certainly and as quickly as though it had been methodically filed away.

“ If things are only left where I put or throw them,” she would petulantly explain, “ then I know where they are. It’s a visual memory, that’s all. But if you go and tidy them up, how the hell am I to know where they’ve got to? ”

The walls of the room, distempered a pale yellow, were three parts covered with books, so many of them that they formed Elinor’s chief excuse for not moving; she had been in the flat over ten years now, ever since 1919, and things accumulated. There were some paintings, too, modernist stuff, largely the work of friends, who had dumped them on her in lieu of payment for their exhibitions at her gallery, or bought by her more in charity than admiration. There was a large window at the far end of the room, with a window-seat, equally littered, but hidden now by heavy curtains.

Richard got the things from the cupboard.

“ What am I to do with all this stuff on the table? ” he shouted to Elinor.

“ What? All those books and things? Is there a chair free? No, you’ll have to clear two, won’t you? Oh, well, put them on my bed for now. If that’s full, shove them on the floor somewhere.”

He carried an armload into her bedroom, which was tiny, dark and badly ventilated, and laid them on the bed. Then he returned to the table. Presently, Elinor came in from the kitchen, triumphantly carrying two frying-pans.

“ You know my passion for sausages, don’t you? ” she said, as they sat down to eat, after Richard had opened the Rudesheimer, “ they *are* my pet food. Especially cold. Mrs Moggridge’s first instructions on coming to me were to see that there’s always plenty of cold sausages in the larder. I nibble them in bed at nights. And they make marvellous sandwiches. Did I ever tell you about Oscar Lebanon? ”

“ Who’s he? ”

“ The actor. You know, the man who played *The Roman Holiday*; butchered it on tour for twelve whole years. He married Paula Beverley. She went mad after

about seven years of it; thought she was the Empress Poppœia. You know:

'The Empress Poppœia  
Was rather a dear.  
She said: "We won't quarrel  
About being immoral."'

They did, though. Like anything. They're divorced now. What was I talking about?"

"Oscar Lebanon. Cold sausages. What's the connection?"

"Oh, yes. Sandwiches. They were playing in different shows when they married, and he was only in the first act of his. And when she came home on their wedding night, she found he'd eaten all her supper and gone to bed and was fast asleep. I always feel I'd have done exactly the same thing myself. That's all. It's not a good story. I don't know why I told it you."

She went on rattling while they ate, and he sat and laughed at her. Elinor's fluency of anecdote and chatter surprised and delighted him every time he saw her.

"Do you like my daffodils?" she asked. "I bought them as an experiment."

"What for?"

"Well, I've got a theory about daffodils, and I wanted to test it. People always say: 'They're so like spring.' They can't help it; it's a sort of reflex action, like knee-jerks. I've noticed it for years. So I bought these and tried it on Angie. She said it. 'I always like daffodils, Miss Johnson. They're so like spring.'" Richard laughed. "I knew a playwright once," she went on, "who was in love with his leading lady, an American, and on one of her first nights he sent her a huge bunch of daffodils, with the appropriate poetic quotation."

"What? 'Fair daffodils, we weep . . . ?'"

"No. The other one. The bard, lovey. You know: 'Daffodils that come before the swallow dares . . .'"

"'And take the winds of March with beauty.' Yes?"

"Well, he was awfully proud of himself, and he



went to see her afterwards, and she thanked him for them ever so prettily, and he was just going to propose, when she added: 'I did love the cute saying you put with them.' He went out and shot himself. That's true, you know. All except the last bit—the suicide, I mean. Actually, he never married. Oh, yes, he did, too. The editress of an Anthology."

"Fool!" laughed Richard.

When they had finished eating, they sat in the fire-light, she on the divan, and he on a humpty on the floor, with a glass of whisky by his side.

"What's been happening to you?" she asked him.

He stared at the fire, and it was a moment before he spoke.

"We've separated," he said, shortly. She started a little. "Are you surprised?"

"N—no," she hesitated. "Not really. Anything definite?"

"Definite enough." He seemed disinclined for a moment to say more, and then he added: "Are you glad?"

"If you're shot of it," she answered, quietly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't think I shall ever be that. But it couldn't go on. I think you knew that." He turned to her suddenly. "Elinor, what's wrong with me? How have I failed her?"

"Just loved her too much. Asked her too much."

"I didn't ask. I swear I didn't. I've taught myself not to."

"Well, then, wanted too much; a dream to come true."

"I suppose so. Oh, but it could have been all right. There were times when it was all right. Better than all right—marvellous. There was one night after we'd been to *Tristan*, and we got the car out and went down to Boxhill. The country was looking wonderful; all moonlight—you know, velvet and silver—with mist in the valley. And we got out, and stood looking at it. And then suddenly she turned and . . ." He stopped, unable to complete the memory in words.

"I hate Brenda," Elinor burst out suddenly. "Yes; I'm going to say it. I hate her for what she's done, to you."

"No. I've done it to myself. It's not her fault. You can't make yourself love anyone. I knew she didn't, when we married. She told me so and I said it didn't matter. I thought I'd rather have it like that than nothing. I didn't know it would get worse: not on her side, but on mine. I didn't know that having her there always would make me love her more and more, want her more and more, like looking at food when you're hungry. She's as fond of me as she ever was, except that I suppose I've got more and more exacting and more and more intolerable about the house. You can't blame her for not loving me."

"She should have known you for what you were, known you couldn't be content with that half-thing that does for most people. Almost anybody but you."

"That's where I was to blame. You're right. Asking too much. Being a bloody fool, not able to cut it out, not able to stop caring. Eight years. It's silly, isn't it? Oh, well, it's over now."

Elinor detected the note of jaunty self-pity in his voice. Her eyes narrowed, and she said in a matter-of-fact tone:

"What are you going to do?"

He caught the faint reproof in her question, and answered simply:

"I've found a flat, I think, near Baker Street."

"Are you divorcing?"

"No. There's no ground. And no need, as far as I can see. We neither of us want anyone else." Emotion broke through again. "God, you don't know how awful it's been, sleeping in the same house, night after night. Lying awake until . . . I'd almost fancy I could hear her breathing through the wall. It won't carry to Baker Street, anyway."

This was melodrama, pure and simple—sheer self-indulgence; but he was a little drunk, and the room was dark, save for the firelight, and he could not see

her face. It had all been stored up so long inside him, masking itself in bitterness, that, while Elinor deplored it, not as others might because it made her uncomfortable, but because it was whining and against all her standards of behaviour, she made no further attempt to check it. The room had become the confessional, and she was glad if he could feel it was a refuge. She cared for him enough to be glad that he should come to her, drunk or sober, without the barriers that he put up between himself and the rest of the world. So she let him go on talking.

"What are you going to do?" she asked again, later.

"I don't know. It doesn't matter much. Write a bit now and then, I suppose. A little music, perhaps. You don't need to tell me that I ought to do some proper work, and that my money's been my curse. I know them both well enough for myself. And you won't tell me I ought to find someone else, either."

"No. I think it might be very nice if you did, though."

"So do I. Very nice. Not that I'd have anything to give her. Nancy said you and I ought to marry, by the way."

"I know. She's hinted it to me, before now. Omitting the ceremony, sometimes, too."

Richard laughed.

"I wish we could have fallen in love with each other, my dear," he said. She did not answer, and he went on: "I suppose I was too young when we first met, and ever since then there's always been someone else for one or other of us."

"We were made to be each other's confidants."

"I'm grateful for you as mine." He shifted his position, leaning back with his head against her knees. "You've stopped confiding in me."

"I've stopped having anything to confide. I like our being like this, though. I'd so much rather be friends with anyone I like, than in love with them."

"Aren't both possible?"

She shook her head, positively.

"No. In love, one's too anxious to put oneself in the

other's power. That's not friendship; it's . . . masochism. You know the Brooke line: 'Love sells the proud heart's citadel to Fate'? One wants to sell it. Besides, there needn't be any end to a friendship."

"And there must to a love affair?" he finished for her. "Well, mine's an extreme case, I suppose. Besides, I've never been in love with anyone who was in love with me. So I can't tell. I'd risk the end."

"We all would. That's the trouble. We all do. We invite it. I tell you, its masochism. I've often thought there isn't a man or woman alive who, if you told them that by going to the end of the street they'd find someone they'd fall in love with, really deeply and desperately in love with, and that when it was over it was going to hurt like hell, warn them, really warn them, there isn't one who'd hesitate. The end of the street did I say? They'd walk ten miles for it."

"Would *you*?"

"Me? Not at my age. Yes, I suppose even at my age I would. I would have once, anyway. I have."

"Well, wasn't it worth while? Even if it did end—if it did hurt? You'd had something; and, besides, isn't the capacity for caring something in itself? Isn't it worth while just to be able really to care for someone?"

"That's the argument. Or rather the excuse. We pretend that's why we'd walk ten miles—or we say it afterwards to bolster up our self-esteem. You don't want to die of self-contempt, so you lay that flattering unction to your soul, that the emotion itself was worth while. Here, what are you doing to me, making me talk like this? Flattering unction! I ought to be ashamed of myself."

"Don't!" he begged her. "Don't laugh. I'm serious. I think you're wrong. I think you're bitter about it. I admit you've plenty of excuse."

"And I think you're sentimental about it. And I admit *you've* had plenty of excuse."

"You don't believe in love any more?" he challenged her. "You think it's always got to bust up in the end? Would it have been like that with Larry?"

She had not meant the conversation to get like this, to lead to her own life. The mention of Larry's name came as a shock to her; she had not heard it spoken for years, but it had been in her mind all the time that she was talking, shouting itself as an argument against all that she was saying. Larry Taylor was the man to whom she had become engaged two years after her divorce from Roly. She paused now for a moment to look back at the memory of herself as she had been then, so bruised by the sordidness of her married life and of her escape from it, that she had crawled away into hiding with every shred of self-respect gone from her, all her belief in herself so beaten down that she could scarcely believe that ever again would she be able even to hold an opinion of her own, to pit herself against anyone. She could speak lightly of that time now, as she had done to Angie that afternoon, but she did it deliberately, defiantly, as though, down the years, she were thumbing her nose at the girl she had been, shouting to her that one came through everything in the end, that nothing really mattered enough; the girl who, after one of her scenes with Roly, had locked herself into her bedroom, trembling and weeping, refusing to come out; the girl who had felt so utterly ashamed and degraded by the time that it was all over, that it no longer seemed possible, even, that hope could rise in her again.

But it had risen, and soaringly, to the point of realisation when, in 1916, working at the Ministry of Pensions, she had met Larry Taylor home on sick leave, fallen in love, and become engaged to him; seen him go out to France again and, two months later, opened the paper one morning and read his name in the Casualty List. The cruelty of the way in which she learned of his death was due to his parents, Irish Catholics, who had objected to his engagement to a divorced woman, refused to recognise her, and denied her any of his possessions. All that she had of him were his letters, and a signet ring that he had given her. The letters she destroyed six months later; the ring, however, she still wore,

though it was infrequently that she noticed it or remembered its origin.

"Would it have been like that with Larry?" Richard asked.

"I expect so," she replied. "He was probably all sorts of things I never knew. I don't suppose it would have lasted."

"That's not true," he said, vehemently. "You don't mean that. You can't mean that. You were going to marry him. You don't really believe it would have failed. Do you?"

"If I don't, it's only because it was unfulfilled."

"It was the best thing in your life. You can't blaspheme against it. You can't deny his memory like that. You still wear his ring."

Instinctively she hid it.

"I know. But I don't know why, really. It doesn't mean anything. Larry's dead. What I say now doesn't hurt him any. It's silly to torture oneself with a might-have-been. Silly and weak. And don't talk about blaspheming against a memory; that's sheer rant and sentimentality. Besides, why should we have been any different from the rest? Do you know a single really happy marriage, where it's gone on the way they hoped? Do you?"

"If I don't . . . if you don't . . . it's because of the people you and I know, because they're not decent enough to make a go of it. You and Larry were. I believe in you. I believed in Larry. If anyone could have pulled it off, you two could have."

"Dick, you're a brute!" she cried. "I know that. I believe that too, deep down inside me. Nobody's ever dragged it out of me before, though, and, Jesus, nobody's to know it but you. But I do believe we could have made a go of it. I dare say I'm wrong; I don't *want* to believe it, really. It's so much easier not to. But I do."

She was weeping now, not sentimentally for her loss, but as though out of shame for her confession.

"I'm glad," he said, simply. "I'm glad you've said it. I've always known that the show you put up,

*all the chatter and not giving a damn for anything, was all pretence."*

"No, not pretence," she insisted. "That makes me sound like one of those awful aching-heart-behind-the-tinsel-mask-of-gaiety creatures. That's not me a bit. It's true, all that chatter. It's what I am. I *don't* give a damn about it all, or most of the people I know either, but they're what I've been handed. I know I ought to have got married properly, and had a husband and children and not bothered with anyone else, but it didn't work out that way, and I'm not going to waste my time regretting it . . . publicly, anyway. And as most of my life's in public . . ." She left the sentence unfinished.

"You *ought* to have had children," he affirmed.

"I know. I know I ought. Listen. I'll tell you something, while we are at it. I was going to have a child, once. About two years after I married Roly I found I was pregnant. It was an accident. Well, I wanted a child—I always have. But not Roly's. I knew what he was, and I wasn't going to give any child of mine a drunken father like that. So I didn't have it, that's all. Nobody knew, except Tom, my brother. He helped me. I hoped that later on I might get rid of Roly and find someone else, and that then it might be all right. I thought I had found him when Larry came along. He and I never slept together. We wouldn't; we thought we'd keep it. Bloody fools! Then you remember about six months after he was killed I got ill—had to have an operation? I had all my insides out. Well . . ." She stopped.

"You mean . . . now you can't have children?"

"Exactly. So that's that. Remains, my novels. Sixteen since the age of twenty. Sounds like a clergyman's wife, doesn't it? 'There was an old woman who lived in a Mew; she wrote so many novels because she didn't know what to do.' I ought to learn something about literary contraceptives. Are there such things?"

"One's own personal life, perhaps. That's about all."

"Then God help me. Or, rather, God help the reading public." She stretched herself, as though ending the

subject. "And now, honey, I'm going to sling you out, so that I can get down to work. See?"

"I see." He smiled back at her, and rose. "Good-bye, and thanks for letting me talk."

"I ought to say, 'Damn you for making me talk.'"

"I've loved it."

"Well, I haven't minded it so much. Let's do it again, some time."

"Whenever you say; but you're never at home."

"I will be, to you. And there'll always be sausages. That might be my epitaph: 'There were always sausages.'"

"I've known worse ones. Good-bye, my dear."

He kissed her affectionately, and went.



### III

ELINOR had been born at Monte Carlo: the most incredibly appropriate place, Hermione said. Her father was a singer, a Scandinavian of the name of Jönssen, which had since, for the convenience of Elinor's reading public, and for the greater confidence of the patients who came to her brother Tom as a nose and throat specialist, been anglicised to Johnson.

Her mother was American, with an ancestry that blended Puritan stock with an accidental Spanish Catholic great-great-grandmother in the distance. It was one of Winkie's favourite jokes to say that Elinor should have been christened Heinz. Her mother came from New England; met her husband when he was singing in Boston; fell in love and married him, against the opposition of a large family; accompanied him to all the capitals where he sang, and gave him two children. Tom, the elder, was born in London, during a Covent Garden Opera season, thereby becoming a British subject; the second was Elinor, born in Monte Carlo, during the storm music of the *Flying Dutchman*, so she said. Tom was sent to school in England, but Elinor went with her parents for the first twelve years of her life, during which she travelled three times round the world.

Her memories of childhood were exciting and highly coloured. Large rooms filled with flowers and photographs and people; staterooms of liners; elaborately furnished suites in rich hotels; terraces and gardens of rented villas; swimming in the Mediterranean or the Pacific; hearing the world's greatest singers from the privacy of a box—all these took the place with her of ink-stained schoolrooms, Noah's Ark nurseries, Kensington Gardens and the Serpentine, holidays at the seaside and Christmas visits to the pantomime. Her education

she acquired from her mother and from her father's accompanist and inseparable companion, an elderly Frenchman of great intellectual equipment.

When she was twelve her mother died of typhoid, and her father brought Elinor to England and did what his wife had always longed for him to do, and to do with him—settled down. He was then forty-eight. He retired from the operatic stage and concert platform, took a house in London, where he gave lessons, applied for naturalisation papers, and sent Elinor to the smartest and most English boarding-school that he could find. She disliked it, but loved the holidays with him and with the old Frenchman and her brother Tom, when he was at home.

Her father died when she was nineteen. Tom had recently married Cynthia, the tall, beautiful daughter of a distinguished portrait painter, and Elinor went to live with them in their house in Weymouth Street, where they allotted her a bedroom and sitting-room on the top floor. It was there, during the year which followed her father's death, that she wrote her first novel, *The Rose Garden*. When Angie declared, rather falteringly, that it was the best thing she had done, she was in many ways right. It was a surprising achievement for a girl of twenty, blending a sweetness and a kind of pretty primness which she had inherited from her mother, with the jolly sophistication which she had learned from her father—the tall, blond, handsome father who had survived twenty years of the opera houses of the world without ever once being unfaithful to his wife—and humorous with the humour that was Elinor's own individual property, inherited from nowhere, a kind of gay, irrelevant, almost tactless humour that attached itself as a decoration to everything she saw or said or thought. Her work lacked, always, the flavour of cynicism that crept later into her life and mind, but this, her first book, had been the work of a girl who had known both happiness and grief, but not yet the bitterness of disillusion.

She had written it as an expression of the belief in

life and its beauty which she then so passionately held, which she had shared with her parents and with almost no one else, except her brother Tom. But Tom, married to Cynthia, was not the friend and playmate he had been; Cynthia was out to make him, to place and set him socially and professionally; he worked hard all day, and in the evenings there were always entertainments and dinner-parties. Cynthia had money, and she spent it on her ambition for Tom. She did not want Elinor in the house; indeed, she found her presence a nuisance and a hindrance to her plans, and indicated, with vague chilly hints that Elinor, used to warmth and affection and outspokenness, did not fail to appreciate, that the bedroom and sitting-room on the top floor might well be regarded as a private suite where she should conduct her own personal life. So Elinor shut herself in and wrote her book, and read prodigiously, and went to concerts and theatres and the opera, for a year and a half. It was in the gallery of Covent Garden, which she came to prefer to Cynthia's box, that she had first met Richard, then only seventeen, and struck up a friendship with him during two cycles of *The Ring*.

*The Rose Garden* achieved success and excellent notices, and just when Cynthia was beginning to see a value in Elinor as a new celebrity at her dinner-parties, and to welcome her more into the life she had designed for herself and Tom, Elinor disappointed her once again by announcing her intention of spending the money she was making out of her book on a trip to China. She gave no reason beyond the fact that she wanted to see China and, flippantly, that she liked rice; put her few possessions into storage, and went.

It was in Hong-Kong that she met Roly Ferguson, and married him in three weeks, just a month after her twenty-first birthday. Roly was then a graceless young rotter of twenty-eight, bullet-headed, with a schoolboy grin and a ruddy complexion that went into vivid red blotches when he was drunk. Elinor saw him drunk for the first time two weeks after they were married, when he came lurching into their hotel bedroom one

night, after having left her alone the whole evening, and proceeded to roll into bed beside her, fully dressed and stinking of whisky, and attempt a gross, slobbering love making. The next morning, after he had slept it off, he was desperately ashamed and contrite, wept and abased himself and implored her forgiveness, which she gave him until next time, which was a month later, when the performance was more elaborately repeated.

When she met him, however, he was sober and jolly and adventurous, with a sort of india-rubber sense of humour and a chunky, freckled irresponsibility; lazy, yet with a capacity for really hard work in spurts. He was the only son of a widow who adored him, and lived at Worthing. He did not mention her existence to Elinor, however, until three months after they were married.

"Do you ever write to her?" Elinor asked

"No. I've got out of the habit. I wrote when my step-father died, and told her I was glad, and I sent her a shawl one Christmas. I went into a Mission Hall in San Francisco one night about two years back, and there was a text on the wall: 'How long since *you* wrote to Mother?' It seemed so damned personal that I went home and did. I think that was the last time."

"Aren't you going to tell her we're married?"

"I will, if you like. I'll send her that snapshot of you in a bathing dress with your left chest showing. It's been an enormous success with everyone I've shown it to, so far."

"Roly, you haven't?"

"Certainly I have. Why not? It's a damn funny picture."

His mother was forgotten in the ensuing discussion.

After leaving home, Roly went to New York, and later found his way to San Francisco, where he stayed two years. It was there that he began to drink and, haunting the docks in search of subjects to paint, to develop a taste for rough company, sailors and tramps and labourers. Presently he migrated to China with an author who wanted him to illustrate a book

on the country that he was writing. It appeared with some success; Roly's pictures were well reproduced and highly praised. He had been in Hong-Kong a few months only when Elinor arrived, and was regarded as a coming man.

The marriage was a love match; they responded to each other's vitality and capacity for fun, and, despite all Roly's habits, Elinor remained in love with him for two years, admiring him, despising him, and being revolted by him in turns, yet loving him with a love that hurt her, because it was her first love and she was young and full of high ideals and a desire for perfection, and because Roly was weak and sensual and unprincipled, and yet desperately attractive to her.

She realised very soon that the East encouraged his taste for drinking, and that if their life together was to be a bearable one, it could not be spent as their first four months were spent, roaming and wandering. It was hard to persuade him to settle down. The past eight years of free-lance living had made him regard impermanence as a natural state, and he had married casually, taking it in his stride, without considering that it might involve any change of status, seeing no reason why Elinor's life should not tack on to his own. That, indeed, had been her idea, too, when she married him; had he been the kind of man she thought him, she would have been happy enough to go with him, with no tie or background but their love for each other and the good comradeship that it brought. The notion had appealed to her; she had no desire to return to London, and she would have liked to be foot-loose with someone whom she cared for, but in four months she learned the impossibility of such a life with Roly. If she were not to wreck herself and her marriage completely, she must bring him home to some settled existence. She took advantage of one of his fits of penitence and self-disgust to hurry him on board a P. & O., and take him back to England, fighting his desire to abandon the project at every port of call.

They returned to London and took a tiny house in

Chelsea, with a studio in which Roly should paint, while she took up her writing again in a tiny first-floor cupboard that held a desk and a bookcase, and was too small to admit of intrusion, which she called her work-room. She planned their life very carefully. The success of her first book, which had gone on reverberating through its even greater success in America since her departure, had given her the right of entry into literary and artistic circles. She exploited this now to the full, for Roly's sake, to establish him as an artist in London, and to fill their life together with the kind of people he might like and who might like him.

For a time it worked well enough. Roly's paintings, exhibited in London, brought him success, drew him into the Chelsea set, where, however, he began to drink again, to spend his evenings pub-crawling in the hearty artistic tradition, to get promiscuous with women with greasy hair and dirty elbows, and to come home battling drunk at least once each week. Elinor fought and fought, despising herself for still caring for him, but slowly her resistance weakened. The regularity of the thing became too much for her. She took refuge in her work, but largely as an anæsthetic; in after years she could never look at her second book without a shuddering memory of the year in which she had written it, mechanically almost, to stave off the pain and wretchedness which seemed to beat through it as an underlying rhythm. It was small wonder that the critics called it "grey" and "grim," and, one of them even, "doggedly depressing." She had fought so hard to keep it from being any of those things, but it read as though she had been suffering from a splitting headache all the time that she was writing. She knew it well enough and, without waiting, threw herself into her third book, a light, careless farce of a novel which, self-mockingly, she felt might well have been called: "Laugh, Punchinello." She made friends with her fellow-writers, but the friendships were without intimacy, on her side at any rate, for she did her best to protect Roly, to admit nothing of her life with him, maintaining an almost too flagrantly

obvious loyalty to him which, while everyone knew it to be false, acted as a barrier to confidence, leaving her relations with them as light, gay acquaintanceships of the surface only.

For three years this lasted. Twice she left Roly, but each time he came after her, begging her to return, and each time she yielded, despising herself for doing so. The climax came one night in March 1913, when she was awakened at two in the morning by Roly bursting into her bedroom with half a dozen men whom he had picked up on his evening's debauch, drunk like himself, and clamouring for the whisky she had hidden from him. One of the men tried to get into bed with her; another began putting on her dresses; and Roly sat down suddenly in the middle of the floor, took off his shoes and tried to put them back on the wrong feet, giggling over his failures, refusing to tell the rest to go, growing abusive when she insisted, shouting out that she was insulting his friends, producing a revolver suddenly from his dressing-table, ranting and threatening murder and suicide. Elinor left him that night, and for good.

Instinctively she went to Tom, who was kindly and protective, but Cynthia was less so. She had long ago refused to have Roly in the house; she had no desire now to have Elinor, on the verge of a nervous breakdown, thrust upon her carefully planned household. Two weeks after her arrival Elinor overheard her on the telephone saying to a friend: "My sister-in-law's come home to roost. It's too infuriating. I know Tom's her brother and a doctor, but what she needs is a mental home." Elinor left the same day. She went to friends in Denmark, and from there conducted her divorce proceedings, which went smoothly enough, except when Roly attempted to break the rules by complying with the Restitution Order and had to be bullied into staying away. The Decree was made absolute in December 1914, and Elinor did not see him again until 1919, by which time resentment had left her, and she was ready enough to be friends with him, to help him re-establish himself as an artist. She bore no malice, thinking by

now so little of herself and her own concerns, that she saw nothing strange in the situation. She lumped Roly in with almost everyone else she knew, whom she liked well enough, who amused her well enough, but in no way entered into her personal life.

That was how she had managed things. Resisting self-pity, even after Larry's death, partly out of pride and partly out of a sense of manners which would not allow her to obtrude her own troubles upon other people, she had coped with life by splitting it into two very unequal parts. The tiny portion which was her own life, where she herself mattered and her own destiny was worked out, was her own affair and shown to almost no one except Richard, whom she saw seldom enough now to make such confidence both possible and safe. She left herself very little time for this personal life of hers, regarding it as something of a bother and an impertinence. In genuine modesty, Elinor considered herself pretty unimportant as a person, although she had enough conceit to approve of herself, and privately to think that, according to her own standard at least, she was probably the decentest woman that she knew.

Men came into her life now and then, but she no longer expected to fall in love again, so she took them as an amusement, which, while it faintly irritated them, at least gave them no burdening sense of responsibility; there were no tears, no vows given or demanded of fidelity, no soul-searchings in her affairs. She conducted them lightly and gaily, as she conducted all her relations with other people and with the numerous varied acquaintances to whom she acted as confidante, entertainer and *entrepreneuse*, her attitude to whom she had tried to explain to Richard the evening that he dined at her flat.

There remained her work, which interested her as a means of livelihood that she enjoyed, but little more. When Richard left her that evening she settled down again to her story, working at it until three, when she went to bed, transferring the pile of books and manuscript to the bathroom, and slept fitfully until seven the



next morning, when she made herself tea on the gas-ring, and worked until nine, when the story was finished. She was aware that it was not as good as she would have liked, and Angie's glances pricked her conscience. So, slightly, did the remarks of her agent when she lunched with him that day. She called on him at his office after a morning of odds and ends. While he talked to her about the details of an American serial contract, she wandered round the room, picking up the books and manuscripts that were lying about, opening them, reading a page here and there, offering disjointed comments and asking questions, while he tried to keep her attention on the matter in hand.

"Elinor, sit down!" he rapped out, finally, in exasperation. "Sit down and sit still, and let's get this settled. I can't do more than one thing at a time."

"That always seems to me such a pathetic limit," she murmured, flippantly.

However, she came and sat down, and listened and answered dutifully, except when she got up again to prow around looking for matches. When they had finished business they started out for lunch, and on the way she remembered that her watch had been losing five minutes a day for the past three weeks, and insisted on stopping at a jeweller's to leave it for repair. She had known the jeweller fifteen years, and it took her ten minutes to get out of the shop, while her agent fretted impatiently behind her.

They lunched at a restaurant near Leicester Square, frequented almost entirely by authors, publishers and actors, of whom she knew so many that it was another ten minutes before she came to rest at their own table.

"I'm so sorry," she apologised, "but there are so many people I know whenever I come to this place that I have to stop at nearly every table. I always feel like a dog passing lamp-posts on its walk."

"I want to talk to you," he said, when they had ordered their food, "and seriously for once. What are you up to?"

"Up to? What do you mean? What am I working

on? The next novel, and the usual lot of articles and stories. You know; you've got the contracts for them."

"Yes, I know. That's what I want to talk to you about. You do too much of that kind of thing. I've been waiting for years for the really good book that you're going to write some day."

"So have I," said Elinor, lightly. "I will, one day, too, if I can remember to buy a pencil sharpener. There is a book in me that I've got to write some time, but it needs peace and quiet and plenty of leisure, and God knows how I'm going to get it. It'll be a good book, too, when it's written."

"Well, don't put it off too long. Why don't you go away, right away into the country or abroad somewhere for six months, and really get down to it? You ought to. You owe it to yourself."

"I owe a lot of things to myself," said Elinor, "but they're mostly written off as bad debts. Anyway, it isn't as important as all that. I've no feeling about having a mission in life, and you know I don't think my stuff matters."

"That's immoral," he commented.

"No, it's not. It's something I can do, and do decently, I know that. I know it isn't tripe, and it's readable, and competent and grammatical, and, as far as it goes, true, so I don't feel I'm earning money dishonestly, as I should if I deliberately wrote muck, and knew it was muck. I don't; I never have; you know that."

"I do. But you know you're not giving the best that's in you, and that's shirking."

"No, it's not the same thing. That other book would be something quite different, as different as if I were to write a symphony. Oh, it wasn't like that when I started, I know. But I didn't get a chance; my marriage and my divorce and the war. I'm not kicking; it just didn't turn out that way, that's all. I'll go back to it one day, or I shan't; but whichever I do, it won't matter a damn to anybody but me. I think it will be a pity if I don't, but I don't think it's very important."

"That's false modesty."

"Hell, it isn't modesty at all. There aren't more than about two people writing now whose work's got any real importance. You know that as well as I do. I certainly don't flatter myself that whatever I wrote I'd be able to add to their number. I've no use for the way most of them talk about their work, and the seriousness with which they take themselves. Either you write as a job, like I'm doing; or you write to please yourself, as a sort of self-indulgence, as I'd like to do. But that's all."

"Well, that's just the point then. Why don't you?"

"I can't afford to, yet. I can't afford the time or the money that I'd lose. I'd have to change my whole life; as you say, really go away. Well, I can't afford to do that. I've made my life the way it is, the way I've had to; it's cram-full. It certainly isn't ideal, but I like it."

She paused a moment as though to inspect herself.

"I haven't got enough to fall back on," she continued. "I'd want a proper background for the life that the kind of work I really want to do would involve me in. I'm not a tranquil person; I'm not a reflective person; I can't get along on my own. I haven't got enough in my life to make it worth while giving up everything that amuses me for the sake of satisfying that other thing in myself."

"You're no artist, that's what it is," he said, with the final hope of rousing her by anger, but she only laughed at him.

"No?" she said in mock wonder, and then: "Oh, stop preaching at me," she fretted. "I know every damned thing you've got to tell me, and you're perfectly right, except that it isn't nearly as important as you think. And I intend to go on my own sweet way, and you'll go on making money out of me."

He gave it up at last, and they talked of other things, with frequent interruptions from people coming over to speak to one or other of them.

"What an awful life yours must be," she said to him, during a lull, "always having to listen to authors

talking about themselves. It's bad enough occasionally like this, but fancy having to do it for a living! I should think you ought to be glad I don't take my work what you call seriously. At least I'm not always ringing you up to ask how many copies of my book have been sold since yesterday, like Emily Matheson; or starting libel actions every week, like Willard Costard; and I don't read my reviews to you over the 'phone, like Lydia Walsh."

"How do you know she does that?"

"The line got crossed one morning, and I heard her. She doesn't know I know. Good Lord, here she is. I never saw her."

She left the restaurant with Lydia, her agent remaining behind to talk business. Lydia, a gaunt, resentful-looking woman, had a heavy grievance which she wanted to unload, concerning her publishers and the lack of enthusiasm which they exhibited over her work and her publicity, and said that she would walk along with her. As they came out, Elinor, calling some last consolation to a complaining novelist inside, collided with a young man who was passing on the pavement. He pulled off his hat to apologise, recognised Lydia Walsh as an acquaintance, and was introduced as Mr. Fairless.

"Did I hurt you?" he said. "I'm most awfully sorry for barging into you like that."

"That's generous of you," Elinor smiled, "considering that it was I who walked into you. As a matter of fact, I'm very grateful to you for stopping me, or I should probably have gone right across the street backwards, still talking, until I hit the theatre opposite. One does, after leaving there; it's the only way to get out. If you ever meet anyone going backwards round the corner saying: 'That's exactly what happened to my last book,' you'll know they've been lunching at Gaston's."

The young man laughed, but half-heartedly, she thought, as though he resented the remark.

"What are you doing these days, Paul?" Lydia asked.

"Working," he answered briefly, "still working

and waiting. There is some talk of a play of mine being done at the Everyman, but it probably won't come to anything."

He was a tall, slight youth in the early twenties, slender almost to the point of scragginess, and looking somehow under-nourished. His clothes were old and spotted with stains, his brown felt hat was discoloured with age, and his shoes were shabby. Elinor noticed all this, but was struck, too, by his face which, for all that it looked a little starved, the cheek-bones too wide and prominent, as though hunger and disappointment had hollowed the flesh beneath them, yet had a curious beauty in the dark blue eyes, the straight nose and the beautifully modelled mouth, that gave to his face the look of a curiously bruised youth, something of a modern Chatterton. He was obviously, from his conversation as well as from his appearance, a writer undergoing disappointment, ill-luck and privation; but there was a sort of dogged conceit, and what, for want of a better phrase, she mentally defined as a kind of shagginess about him, incompatible with any ideas of suicide in a garret.

"So that was why he didn't like my joking about Gaston's," she thought, as she looked and listened to him. "Wished he were in a position to go there himself, poor wretch."

"Who was that?" she asked Lydia Walsh, as they walked away.

"Paul Fairless? His father used to be a reader for Oliphant; died last year. I've known Paul since he was a baby. He writes a bit: plays, chiefly, and verse; does scene designs for the theatre."

"Any good?"

"I don't know. Yes, I believe so," Lydia answered without interest. "He married a couple of years ago. His parents were furious. Cut him off with a shilling."

"He looks as if he were trying to save it," Elinor commented.

"Yes, he has a hard time making both ends meet," said Lydia, brightly.

"Why did they cut him off?"

"Oh, disapproved of the marriage. Thought he was too young. So he was; they're babies, both of them. Oh, they didn't exactly cut him off, but I mean they wouldn't help him. He's got about two hundred a year of his own, and he made ten pounds out of a volume of verse last year. I think that's all he's got to live on. If you ever hear of a job going in the theatre, or anything, I'm sure he'd be grateful."

"I'll remember," said Elinor.

Lydia accompanied her, talking grumblingly, as far as André's, Elinor's hairdresser in Dover Street, where she had an appointment. As they walked down Shaftesbury Avenue and passed the theatres with their posters outside, Lydia said:

"I do wish I wrote plays. Just think of the satisfaction of seeing your name on all the 'buses everywhere you went. There's nothing in novel-writing to compare with it. I think that if I had a play on, I'd want to live in a taxi outside the theatre, and have all my meals brought to me there. I know I'd go and see it every night. Just think of being able to *watch* the effect of your work on people. I've always hoped that one day I might find myself in a railway carriage with somebody who was reading one of my books, and just sit and watch their face. I've always been frightfully jealous of playwrights."

It was a quarter-past four when Elinor left André's. She was due a little later at a cocktail party and, after that, to dine at Cynthia's, but she first took a taxi home to collect from Angie any telephone messages which might have accumulated during her absence.

"I just asked Mrs. Moggridge to make me a cup of tea," Angie said nervously. "I hope you don't mind Oh, here it is. Won't you have it?"

"I'll have some more," said Elinor. "I've just time for a cup before I dash out again."

"Have you got to go out again?" Angie asked, pityingly. "I'm sure you're going out to-night, too. You ought to lie down and get a rest. You look tired out."

"I can't think why," said Elinor lightly. "I've had a grand nap at the hairdresser's."

While she drank the tea that Mrs. Moggridge brought her, Elinor sat on the edge of her desk, asking Angie questions about her home and her family, and the hostel in which she lived in London. Angie grew garrulous and confidential on the subject of her father and her step-mother, whom she christianly tried not to dislike but to see the best in, and her brothers and sisters, of whom there appeared to be an unending number.

"You remind me of *Little Meg's Children*," Elinor said. "Have you ever read it? You must borrow my copy, only do be careful with it, because it's rather precious. I stole it from an hotel in Italy. It's bowdlerised."

"What does that mean?" Angie asked.

"Expurgated," Elinor explained. "All the nasty bits cut out."

"Nasty bits? But I thought it was a children's book?"

"It is," said Elinor, "but it's full of nasty bits about the devil, and a girl who used to get drunk in the streets. And there are some wicked passages where little Meg loses hope, and wishes God had taken her as well as her baby brother. They're all heavily crossed out in pencil in this copy, and there's even one page that's been cut out with a pair of scissors. It was obviously destined to be read aloud to some super-sensitive child."

"One is sensitive as a child, though, isn't one?" Angie said, wisely. "I mean, there were all sorts of things that I couldn't bear as a child, because they were too sad. I remember I never could stand Mother singing me to sleep with 'Darby and Joan,' or even with 'Sing me to sleep,' because they made me cry so, and I was quite ill after reading *Black Beauty*. It had to be taken away from me. Were you like that? Used all those sad songs to upset you?"

"Not songs," Elinor became reminiscent. "I grew up on good music. You see, my father was a singer. I

had terrible earache as a child, and he used to sing to me by the hour, lovely folk-songs, and Scandinavian children's songs, and cradle songs, and things. I didn't get any of the sentimental ballads. But I used to weep buckets over books: *Misunderstood* and *The Wide, Wide World*. What a little beast Ellen was!"

"Oh, but there were some nice children's books, too," Angie said, eagerly. "Didn't you read Mrs. Molesworth, Miss Johnson: *Carrots, just a Little Boy*, and *The Cuckoo Clock*? Oh, and *What Katy Did* and *Little Women*. Didn't you love Jo? Do you remember: 'Does genius burn, Jo?' Do you know," she added, shyly, "I can't help thinking of that with you sometimes, when you get worked up over a story that won't go right."

Elinor laughed, pleasantly, and together they plunged into a comfortable stream of reminiscence over children's books, until she suddenly caught sight of her wrist-watch.

"Christ Almighty!" she ejaculated, shattering in two words the atmosphere of warmth and cosiness between them that their talk had engendered. "Half-past five, and I've got to change. Can I wear these stockings with that red frock, the velvet one? Well, I'll just have to, that's all. Go and dig out my other bag, Angie—the gold one. There's a lamb."

"That reminds me, Miss Johnson. I've got some change of yours," said Angie, who always chose the most inconvenient moment to render up faithful and long-winded accounts of petty cash. "Eight and eleven, it is. You gave me a pound this morning, you remember. Can I settle it with you now? It was five shillings for the type-writing ribbons, and there was sixpence for blotting paper, and fivepence halfpenny on that parcel . . ."

"Don't!" screamed Elinor. "I haven't time now."

"I wish you'd let me," Angie persisted. "Otherwise it'll hang over for days."

"You can do it in the morning," Elinor said petulantly.

"Yes, I know," persisted Angie, "but in the morning



there'll be something else. You'll be going out, or coming in, or wanting to dictate, or ring up somebody in a hurry, and then it'll get left over and left over. It won't take a minute. I've got the account typed out."

"Oh, put it in my bag with the change, and then it'll do for my taxi and give me something to read on the way. And if there are any farthings you can keep them for your honesty. You are maddening about money, Angie."

"You're very careless about it," Angie retorted, severely. She put the money, together with her little typewritten account, into an envelope, which she placed in Elinor's bag, and handed them to her as she whirled out of the flat five minutes later, with a rush of last-minute instructions.

Angie remained to finish her typing and tidy up, in a state of puzzlement at the contrast between the comfortable Elinor who, as she had done this afternoon, would so often drop work and chat as happily and as easily as any friend that Angie had known, who took pleasure in the small things, and the simple things, and the homely things of life—and the sharp, sophisticated Elinor, who swore and was sarcastic, and lived in a social whirlwind, and appeared to make fun of religion and chastity and fidelity and everything that Angie believed in. It was a contrast which frequently worried her.

## IV

BUT that conversation had not been without its effect on Elinor, too. As she bumped to Bruton Street in a taxi, and made the irritating discovery that she had left her lipstick in the other bag, and that she felt naked without it, one-half of her mind still lingered over the memories of her childhood that the talk had brought to the surface. She was conscious of an obscure envy of the simplicity of Angie's life, of a desire for tranquillity and less rush, less giddy socialising, of a weariness of the insincerity of nine-tenths of her life, an insincerity so blatant that it was itself almost a frankness. She reflected, too, for a few moments, on her agent's words at lunch, and wondered whether it might not be a good thing to give it all up, as he had suggested, for a while at any rate; to go away and really cultivate some kind of quietude. There was a little cottage on the south coast kept by a woman who had once been her father's cook, where she had in the past spent odd periods of a week or so, usually finishing off some work at high pressure, writing five or six hours a day, reading and walking the Downs when her hand grew too tired. Why should she not go down there now and dig herself in solidly for six or nine months? The idea was attractive.

The taxi came to a stop. She leaped out, paid it and ran up the stairs into the middle of the cocktail party. She met her hostess near the door, attired in black satin pyjamas.

"Darling," was cooed in her ear, "I'm so glad you've come. Do go and help Willie with the cocktails, will you? He's so tight already that he hasn't the slightest idea what he's putting in them, and I think he is drinking them all himself. Nobody seems to be getting any. Will

you go and see what you can do, Elinor? There's a sale going on in the bedroom. I must go and look after it."

"A sale of what?" Elinor asked.

"Underclothes, darling. The divinest ones, just over from Paris. But they're getting so woman-handled; the place is a sea of *crêpe-de-chine*. Aggie's tried on five pairs already."

"Is that what the party's for?"

"Principally, darling. It's Zelda's show, but I'm getting a commission on everything she sells here. Do go and stop Willie using my '74 brandy in the Side-cars. The *Trois Étoiles* will do perfectly well."

Elinor began to push through the crowd. The room was very full, mostly of women, but there were also a few young men present, two of whom had apparently thought it amusing to come in tennis flannels. She saw Richard's wife, Brenda, tall and dark and very lovely, standing by the piano talking to a chubby, pink, blond young man in a high-necked saxe-blue sweater, who was petulantly protesting about something.

"Not unless I'm asked again, and properly," he was saying, "and all these things are taken off the piano, and everybody's made to sit down and listen, instead of wandering about jabbering. How do they expect me to play like this? I'm not a hired entertainer *yet*, thank God."

Elinor avoided Brenda's signals of a desire to talk to her, and elbowed her way to the drink-table, where she applied herself vigorously to shaking cocktails for a while, although the shaker leaked and dripped down the front of her dress, and she began to feel extremely tired.

"What are you doing that for?" said a man's voice beside her.

"Exercise," she answered. "Do you want one? These are quite harmless, compared to Willie's. He's used up all the strongest ingredients, anyway. I seem to have come to the end of the gin."

"Put it down, and give it a rest. You look tired."

"That's only because I've left my lipstick at home. You haven't got one, have you?"

"No, but there are lots of young men here who look as if they have. Never mind about that, though. Come and sit down. I want to talk to you. You *are* Elinor Johnson, aren't you?"

"I am."

"I've been wanting to meet you for years."

"There now!" she said, with a Cockney accent. "Isn't that nice!"

"My name's Benford."

"A. C. K.?"

"Yes. Augustus Charles Kenyon, in *Who's Who*. Gus, to real friends. There's a chair in the corner. Let's take it."

He found a seat for her in an alcove, and squatted on the floor by her side. He was a slight, fair-haired man, probably in the late thirties, rather spruce, with a comic smile that sent a gay fanwork of tiny wrinkles radiating from the corners of his eyes. She knew him as the author of three light, witty and over-sophisticated novels which had had a certain smart success and had amused, although also irritated her by their conscious cleverness and too precious writing.

"Why haven't we met before?" he asked. "No, as a matter of fact, I know. It's these damned cliques authors move in nowadays."

"Does that mean you or me?"

"Oh, both of us. But you hunt with all the other women novelists, don't you? And I'm afraid that if there's one thing I can't stand it's women novelists. They will go about looking like a sort of superannuated literary hockey team, inviting the men's team to come and play on the home ground."

Elinor laughed, and decided that she liked this man.

"Well, you belong to the Mayfair Harlequins, don't you?" she asked.

She thought she detected a momentary glint of anger in his eyes, as though he disliked being made fun of; but he laughed, too, and admitted it.

"Yes, I suppose I do," he said. "Is that very dreadful? I never can see why it's considered such a sin to be what's called smart, or expensive . . ."

"Wrist-watch," Elinor put it.

"Yes, if you like. Why are you all so down on it? It's like the urchins who shout after you when you go out in a dinner-jacket before dark during the summer. Why am I any the worse because I've never written about anybody with an income of less than five thousand a year? Why ought one to be more ashamed of having a gardenia in one's buttonhole than a mangel-wurzel in one's hand? Surely neither is intrinsically good or bad?"

"Have I said it was?" Elinor asked, amused.

"No; but people always will talk as if it were; as if it's somehow fine to write about a seduction in Sussex, and cheap to write about one in South Street. It's the seduction that counts, surely? And what I say is, let's be comfortable."

"You don't look it, by the way," said Elinor, parenthetically.

"Oh, I am. I can sit cross-legged for hours. No, but I get so sick of this eternal yapping because one writes about people with money."

"Yes, you're touchy on the subject," she commented, dryly. "I didn't really mean anything like that, but, after all, if you will call me a member of a hockey team, surely I'm entitled to come back with the Mayfair Harlequins, aren't I?"

"But you're not a member of the team," he insisted, "that's what I was going on to say, only you interrupted me." She gasped, and then laughed. "I think you ref for it sometimes," he went on, "or perhaps stand in the crowd and cheer half-heartedly out of a sense of duty. But I know it gives you giggles more often than not. I remember seeing you once at some authors' dinner, when you behaved perfectly disgracefully: giggled through half the speeches, and then went to sleep and set fire to the tablecloth with your cigarette. That was when I finally decided that I wanted to meet you."

"Sweet of you," Elinor murmured, amused in spite of herself. "Wasn't it at that 'do' that Oliphant had for the author of *Let's all go Native*? I did think that was a bad book, didn't you?"

"I did. But this was that American woman, who wrote something called *Come Rack, Come Rape*. I remember old Mrs. Anthony Worsted was there, dressed in a sort of embossed wallpaper, and terribly deaf, wanting to know in the middle of the speeches: 'What did you say the name of the book was, dear?'"

"Oh, yes," said Elinor. "She woke me up with her shouting. She is the Grand Old Woman of literature, isn't she? Why shouldn't one have G.O.W.'s as well as G.O.M.'s? One might call them Gows and Goms."

"Oh, one might," he took this up, joyfully. "In fact, one will! What constitutes a Gow, exactly, do you think?"

"It's largely a matter of endurance," said Elinor. "Size and clothes help, of course, and deafness makes an excellent qualification, as it usually goes with the right kind of voice. But it's a question of manner, really."

"The Queen Victoria manner," Gus added. "The 'We are not amused' quality."

"Oh, but they are, often," Elinor objected. "A Gow's amusement is a gorgeous thing, God wot. It's like earth tremors. No, it's that immemorial quality that really makes a Gow what she is. That sense of her having been there from what the lawyers call 'time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary.'"

They went on like this for a while, and then he said:

"What a grand person you are! Do let's meet again soon. That is, if you're going now. You look as if you were."

"Oh, I always look like that," she told him. "But, as a matter of fact, this time I really am. I've got to dine with my sister-in-law."

"That's depressing. I always imagine every woman novelist has a sister-in-law in the suburbs with whom she dines once a week; very admiring of her behind her back, and very disapproving to her face. And elder

'sisters, too, who tell all their friends how clever Maud was as a child: 'Always making up stories and writing little plays, you know,' he quoted. Have they? "

"Do you know, most of them have!" Elinor laughed. "They usually *are* youngest daughters, too. I don't know why. But my sister-in-law isn't a bit like that. She's rather grand. That's why I must go, now. I'm late as it is, and she'll be awfully cross if I turn up with my dress back to front, as I did once. Personally, I thought it was rather a joke, but she was furious. Said people wouldn't understand. I don't know what she meant. What was there to understand, anyway? I said it was the kind of thing that might happen to anybody, and she said it wasn't, that it only happened to me. She's right there, really. I know that if I ever did set out to be really smart just for once, bought a hundred-guinea gown, and had my hair and my face and my nails worked on for weeks in advance, I'd find at the last minute that I hadn't got a pair of shoes to match my frock. Look here," she added, catching herself, "I *must* go."

"Where can I get hold of you?" he asked. "In the telephone book, or are you too proud? Will you dine with me one night? And have you any objection to the Embassy? "

"Not the very least. Why should I have? "

"It's so smart," he laughed. "People wouldn't understand there, either. I'll telephone you, then. Good-bye."

She met her hostess again in the doorway, and fretted impatiently at the flood of scandal, disparagement and blessings to which she had to listen before she could get away.

It was already seven o'clock. She lay back in the taxi reflecting with amusement on Gus Benford's conversation, and then was seized with her habitual panic lest she had left her key behind her. She had. This involved knocking up the wife of the chauffeur who lived below her and kept a duplicate key to her flat for these occasions. If the chauffeur's wife were out, that meant that she would

not be able to get in, and would have to go on to Cynthia's dressed as she was, which she felt was just the sort of thing that would happen to-night. But luck was with her.

"I was expecting you, Miss," said the woman, grinning broadly. "Your little sekkertry told me that you had left your bag behind, with everything in it. She was quite upset about it; wanted to stop and wait for you in case you couldn't get in when you came back."

Elinor thanked her, with an inward smile of appreciation of Angie's thoughtfulness, and ran up the stairs to her flat, where the telephone was ringing. It was Norman Clifford, an elderly musician, half-brother of Hermione.

"Hang on a minute," Elinor said, "while I light the geyser."

She rushed into the bathroom, turned on the water and ran back to the telephone, throwing off her hat and coat on to the divan.

Norman wanted to know whether she was dining at Cynthia's and, if so, whether she could arrange to go on with him afterwards to see his sister, Betsy.

"We've got something to tell you," he said in a heavy, pompous voice, thick with mystery and importance, "something that I think may interest you. So can you just be ready to go when I give you the sign? Don't talk about it at Cynthia's, though. We rather want to keep it a secret just at present."

The telephone rang three times more while she was dressing, once dragging her out of her bath to pad, dripping and barefooted, across the draughty floorboards, leaving wet footprints on the rugs. Her necklace broke while she was telephoning for a taxi, and some of the stones rolled under the cabinet, where she got dusty knees trying to retrieve them. It was ten minutes to eight when she finally caught up her old green velvet cloak, tipped the entire contents of her morning bag into her evening one, saw a shilling roll to join the beads under the cabinet, and rushed out, leaving her clothes scattered all over the flat.



She was five minutes late at Cynthia's. One glance round the room, as she hastily gulped her cocktail, told her that she was in for a bad evening. Cynthia's entertaining was always carefully graded, and to-night's selection of guests, including, as it did, Nancy and Sam Rossiter, showed her that this was a scratch party, assembled by Cynthia, with not too good a grace, to entertain Morris and Julia Baird, the American theatrical manager and his wife, with whom she had somehow landed herself. There was a curious atmosphere of disinclination about almost everyone as they stood round the spacious, rather elaborately bare drawing-room, with the tall portrait of Cynthia, elegant and aloof in the evening dress of 1906, above the fireplace. The only person, Elinor reflected, who would be likely to derive pleasure from the evening was Nancy, since she, at least, would find it exciting to meet a theatrical manager.

At dinner, Elinor found herself next to Norman Clifford, and knew from experience that no conversation could be expected from him until after the entrée. He was a morose, congested little man of sixty, with a white imperial beard, a composer and conductor, who had flourished during the earlier years of the century when Ballet was in its heyday at the Empire, and had since sunk into an obscurity for which he blamed modern popular music, which he still called "rag-time," never having been able to assimilate the word "jazz." He seemed always to be glued in a sticky morass of rumination on something that had been said to him several hours before, as though he were considering whether it were really worth thinking about; and to-night he seemed more than usually embedded, with an air of having some secret of world importance wrapped up somewhere on his person. It would quite obviously take him at least three courses to come unstuck.

He was a bachelor, who lived, with an elderly housekeeper, in gloomy seclusion in a large, old-fashioned house on Hampstead Heath; seldom going out, and entirely alone in the world save for two sisters, one whole

and the other half. His half-sister, Hermione Van Leer, sat opposite him this evening at dinner. She was a very tall, thin woman; her face, with slightly protruding pale-blue eyes, suggested a wax doll which, having been put too near the fire, had started to melt from the cheek-bones downwards, and she had a habit of making up her mouth a light scarlet, and carelessly, so that the colour came off on to her rather prominent front teeth. She had been at school with Elinor and was about her age. After many years of married exile in Brussels she had returned, a few years ago, a widow, to London, where, on not too much money, she had set up a furniture and interior decorating business, and established herself as a hostess in a promising way. She knew a large number of journalists and gossip-writers, and her parties always managed to get into the papers, although she disclaimed any knowledge of how they did so. This evening she was being very cordial to Morris Baird, the American producer.

Norman being sunk in brooding, Elinor turned to Sam Rossiter, who was her other neighbour, and quite outspokenly hating the party.

"This is going to be a jolly evening," he said in an intimate undertone. "I wish Nancy would take a lesson from Winkie there; at least she leaves her husband at home."

"He's away in Wales, I believe," said Elinor, and then called across the table, "Winkie darling, didn't I read something about Goronwy in the paper yesterday?"

"What, my sweet? My little husband?" Winkie raised her mop of marmalade-coloured hair and her pretty, round, snub-nosed face from above her oysters. She was an ex-musical-comedy actress, whose marriage to Sir Goronwy Lloyd-Ellis, the Welsh historian and nationalist, had created a mild sensation some years before, and had led to his being prayed for in his chapel at home. "He's been at a lovely little place in North Wales, with a name fifty-two letters long, lecturing about his book. Did you read it, darling? It was the

biggest little book you ever did see; broke the bathroom scales when I tried to weigh it. All about an old Welsh king who made some lovely little laws they've dug up somewhere. I think he's stopping at an Eisteddfod on the way home."

"What in hell's that?" asked the American manager. "A mountain inn?"

"No, it's a place where you take the waters, isn't it?" Nancy put in seriously.

"No, darling, you're thinking of Llandrindod. An Eisteddfod's a sort of lovely little musical evening that goes on for days. They have the sweetest little choirs of old gentlemen from all the villages in Wales, and they come and sing the same piece of music for thirteen hours on end, and the ones who get the most marks win. Goronwy did take me to one, once, but I had to be carried out. Poor little Winkie got quite hysterical after she'd heard a part-song about a cuckoo for the twenty-seventh time."

Elinor and Sam went on talking until, suddenly, from Norman Clifford there came, sepulchrally, the one word: "Genée."

"I beg your pardon?" said Elinor.

"Genée," repeated Norman. "*There was a dancer, if you like.*"

"Yes?" said Elinor, politely.

"They've asked me to conduct an act from *Coppelia* for a charity performance next month. Some modern woman dancing, whom nobody's ever heard of. Did you ever see Genée?"

"Yes. I remember going with Roly once."

"But you like the Russians, don't you?" Norman said, fiercely. "All this modern stuff! That's not dancing, it's acrobatics. Disgrace to the name of ballet. But it's the same with everything. Look at the modern musical comedies; just one tune over and over again. What we want is a revival of the old stuff. Melody; the old things are just chock-full of melody."

He began excogitating memories. Elinor let her mind wander as she listened, and gave herself up to

the very excellent dinner that Cynthia had provided, exchanging a grin of sympathy with her brother, who was doing his best with Mrs. Baird, a hard, bright, tenacious lady.

Elinor no longer very much minded being bored. Her attitude on such occasions as this was not unlike that of the dramatic critic, who sees innumerable plays, finds something of interest in most of them, and seldom anything of outstanding merit. So, to her, it was with people. Gus Benford, this afternoon, had been an exception. She found herself thinking of him now, with pleasure and amusement in the memory, surprised to find how much she looked forward to seeing him again. He had made her laugh, he had flattered her, and he had attracted her. She conjured up a mental vision of him, and wondered what it was in him that she had found attractive, since not only was he not good-looking, but there was, in retrospect at least, a faintly meretricious quality of showiness and nattiness about him that suggested the music-hall artist—the mark, perhaps, of a bounder. But she had always liked bounders. Roly had been the supreme example. They had a quality of effrontery and sheer cheek to which something in her responded; it was, perhaps, that they seemed to have so much more gusto for life than other people.

“I wonder what he’d be like to have an affair with,” she thought, realised that the idea was not displeasing, registered that realisation, and answered what Norman was saying.

Dinner finished somehow. She glanced at her watch as the women rose from the table, and saw that it was half-past nine. Another hour and a half, she reflected, then Norman and Betsy for an hour at the very least. She wondered if she could count on being in bed by one. She was very tired, and the evening was making a severe drain on her vitality. It seemed to have reached a kind of yawning climax of aridity. She felt as though she were being choked with dry biscuit, and then, shaking off the sensation, made herself talkative in the drawing-room. Cynthia, cool, delicate, detached, like a

beautifully carved figure in crystal, smiled gratefully at her across the room. "I'm earning my dinner," thought Elinor.

Presently Mrs. Baird came over and sat beside her on the sofa. She was a hard-faced woman, with features like those of some agreeable bird of prey, set now in a sort of rocky smile.

"I've wanted to meet you for years, Miss Johnson," she began. "I'm simply crazy about *The Rose Garden*."

"That damned book again," thought Elinor, but merely smiled: "Oh, yes."

"Have you ever thought of dramatising it?" Julia Baird went on. "Have you ever realised what an awfully good play there is in it?"

"No," Elinor replied, "I'm afraid I haven't. I don't think about it more than I can help."

"Why not? Don't you like it yourself?"

"I'm sick of it," said Elinor in sudden revolt. "I'm sick of having it thrown up against me. Do you realise that the next ten books I wrote were all compared unfavourably with it? All my reviews said something about 'Miss Johnson fails here to recapture the magic of *The Rose Garden*.' I've always wanted to answer with an article called 'Who the Hell's Trying?'"

"Yes, I suppose it must be tiresome," the lady replied. "Of course, I like your other books, too."

Elinor resisted the temptation to confound her by asking which she had read.

"Have you ever written a play?" Mrs. Baird asked her.

"Never," said Elinor. "I tried once, but I couldn't keep the cocktails out."

"The cocktails?"

"Yes. They're fatal in the theatre, I've found," Elinor laughed. "If you have one cocktail in a play the critics all think it's an immoral comedy about the smart set, and then they don't like it. I've always thought there ought to be a fund for providing dramatic critics with cocktails. They never seem to have had enough, poor darlings, judging from the effect it has on them to see one on the stage."

"Well, that may be true of England and English critics, but I assure you it isn't of American ones."

"No," said Elinor. "I know. Their phobia on the stage is tea. Well, I suppose there could always be tea in the English version and cocktails in the American one."

"I don't see that there need be either in *The Rose Garden*," Mrs. Baird assured her. "I wish you'd think about it—dramatising it, I mean. Of course, one could get someone else, but it would be so much better if you could do it yourself—for the *feeling*, you know. Morris would love to put it on, if it was any good. You must talk to him about it."

She buttonholed her husband when the men returned to the drawing-room, and pulled him down on the sofa beside her. He was a jolly, rotund American Jew, with greying hair that tumbled in a love-lock over his forehead. He always looked as if he had shaved the day before, and his mouth would have been incomplete without a cigar. He was vague and cheerful and elusive on his wife's proposition.

"I'll read the book," he said, finally. "Where can I get a copy?"

"I'll send you one," said Elinor.

"Fine. Can you let me have it in the morning? I'm going to Berlin in the afternoon and I can read it on the train."

"Why don't you come and lunch with me?" Julia asked in a voice that sounded somehow like a vulture making itself particularly pleasant. "I'm not going to Germany with Morris. What about to-morrow?"

"I'm afraid I can't to-morrow."

"Thursday?"

"I can't Thursday, either. I'm lunching with my husband."

"Well, bring him along," she said in some surprise. "I didn't realise you were married. He isn't here to-night, is he?"

"No. I don't think I'd better bring him along, though," Elinor smiled. "You see, he isn't my husband any more. Hasn't been for quite a long time."

*Julia nodded. She had been through two divorces.*

"Friday?" she asked, tenaciously.

"Friday would be lovely," Elinor agreed patiently.

"We're staying at the Ritz. One o'clock? That'll be perfect."

She rose from the couch, just missing Hermione, who was coming across to make friends with her. Hermione sat down by Elinor, disappointed.

"What's Norman's great secret?" Elinor asked.

"He's very thick with mystery to-night."

Hermione laughed, contemptuously.

"Hasn't he told you?" she asked.

"No. He's taking me on to Betsy's afterwards. Are you coming?"

"No, darling. Betsy and I aren't liking each other a lot, just now. I'm afraid I told her what I thought of this latest insanity of hers. I won't spoil it for you. You'll get a good laugh. Poor Norman's so full of importance, it's quite pathetic."

Her laugh was malicious, and tinged, Elinor felt, with a certain resentment, the contempt of one who has been left out of some attractive proposition.

At this point the butler entered with drinks. Winkie had been sitting at the piano, rather mournfully playing, with the soft pedal down, to a young barrister who had been invited as a make-weight and was now curved over the music-rest, gazing at her. She looked up suddenly, and caught sight of the tray.

"Ooh! Whisky!" she squealed. "Lovely! Winkie wants a d'inkie! Tom, give Winkie d'inkie! Lovely little d'inkie, and then home to lovely little beddie-byes!"

After the drinks had been distributed, Norman rose with a conspiratorial glance at Elinor, and began to make formal good-byes. Elinor caught Cynthia's eye, read in it an injunction against going, and looked the other way. Sam rose, too, and with him, obediently, Nancy. There was a sudden general move, and an air of relief.

"Can we give you a lift, darling?" Nancy asked.

"Elinor's not going yet," *Cynthia put in, firmly.*

"I must, dear," said Elinor, a little guiltily. "I've been out and on the go since dawn."

"I'll take you home," Norman said, heavily, with a proprietary smile.

The women went up to Cynthia's bedroom to get their cloaks.

"Why don't you come back and have a drink with us?" Nancy asked Elinor. "I've got lots and lots to tell you. I had tea with Richard yesterday."

"I know," said Elinor. "He told me. He had supper with me."

"What's the truth of his leaving Brenda?" Nancy asked, eagerly. "I do so want to know all about it. Do come back, and let's have a cosy talk in my boudoir. You too, Hermione. Let's all go back and really dish the dirt!"

"Not to-night, darling," said Elinor. "Some other time. Ring me up and we'll arrange it."

She left them and went downstairs into the hall, where Norman was winding himself into a thick woollen muffler and fighting the butler with his overcoat, rather like a cross baby. The others followed. Half-way down the stairs Nancy perceived Julia Baird lingering at the drawing-room door, and darted back to say good-night and ask her to lunch one day, while Sam, ready to start, fretted in the hall below, muttering to himself: "Oh, come on, come on! Have we got to wait all night?"

"Look at Nancy grabbing," Hermione whispered in Elinor's ear.

It took them a long time to get away, because Norman suddenly thought that he had left his key behind him, and had slowly to unwrap himself to look. At last, however, Elinor flung her arms round Tom, giving him a good-night, sisterly hug, and preceded Norman into a taxi. While he was trying to remember his sister Betsy's address, Nancy emerged from the house with Sam, who, as the front door shut behind him, ejaculated in a voice that could be heard down Weymouth Street:



"My God, what a bloody evening!"

"Sam, shush!" Nancy laid her hand on his arm, with a terrified backward glance at the house; then she perceived Elinor and Norman in the taxi, raised her eyebrows and shook her head in mock disapproval.

"Now, then, you two!" she called. "Mind you be good!"

Elinor blew her a kiss through the window, and the taxi drove off.

"Now, what's the secret?" Elinor asked, but Norman merely replied:

"You'll hear"; and then added: "How rotten Hermione's looking! Starving herself as usual, I suppose. I wish you'd teach her to make-up properly. She looked a sight. Besides, she's much too old to wear white."

They drove to the flat of his elder sister in South Molton Street. Betsy Hartog was a riotous old goblin of nearly seventy, three times widowed, who spent most of her life romping round the spas and the casinos of Europe. In her early youth she had been a singer, but had lost her voice through illness, and had done nothing since, except enjoy life in a sort of rollicking, never-ending bust.

She opened the door to them herself this evening, a comic little figure, with a beaming smile, and a reddish wig held rakishly slightly to one side with a pearl-sewn Juliet cap and an osprey brush. She wore a black lace dress with a short silver sequin coatee.

"Come in," she said, kissed Elinor moistly on the mouth, and took them into a tiny, overheated drawing-room, furnished in Empire style.

"What do you think I'm going to do next?" she chuckled, after she had given them drinks and cigarettes.

"I should never be surprised at anything you did," Elinor laughed. "What is it? Are you going to get married again?"

"No, dear, not as far as I know. I'm going into management, theatre management. What do you think of that, eh?"

"Have you written a play?" Elinor asked.

"I may be a fool, darling," Betsy said in a cracked bass voice, "but I'm not a bloody fool! No, I'm going to put on a season of revivals of all the old Operettes, and Norman here's going to conduct them. There!"

Norman swelled with importance, his little eyes glistened, and his right hand sought the inside of his coat in a Napoleonic gesture.

"What do you think of the scheme?" she went on, gruffly. "You know, *Madame Angot*, and the *Fille du Régiment*, and *La Périchole*, and perhaps a couple of Norman's own to keep him in a good temper. They never had much chance, Norman's didn't. He wrote them about ten years too late, like everything else he's done, when the vogue was dying, but I thought we might include a couple of them. What d'you think of it?"

"I . . . I don't know," said Elinor, rather taken aback. "It sounds marvellous. But where's the money coming from, or is that an indiscreet question?"

"Me!" Betsy went off into an ancient explosion of laughter. "I've had a legacy, quite a large legacy, from a very dear old friend of mine, and I'm going to blue it on this. You think I'm quite mad, don't you, Elinor, and I shouldn't be surprised if you weren't right. But I'd like to see the old operas again myself before I die, and it gives the boy here a chance, and I shan't miss the money. It's time Norman did do something again before they put him in the Abbey. He's always grumbling that nobody ever gives him a chance; well, now he can't grumble any more, and that'll be a comfort. Old sister Betsy to the rescue!"

"It's not for myself," Norman said, hastily and rather haughtily. "I've no wish to push myself forward. I'd take a back seat to-morrow, if anybody else could be found to do it. But I think the public *ought* to hear these things again. I shouldn't be surprised if the response wasn't such that we were able to make a regular institution of it in time—have a regular *opéra comique* all the year round."

"Hermione thinks we're cracked, but she won't

want to be left out," said Betsy. "She's very haughty at the moment, but you'll see her come running round once we get going. Well, she can look after the social side, if she wants to, all the publicity and what not. I believe she's fitted up the bathrooms of half the peeresses in London, so she can probably rope them in. She's got a genius for getting herself in the papers. Now what I wanted to ask you, Elinor, was whether you knew anybody who'd do the scenery for us. I've been abroad so much that I'm out of touch with things here, but you ought to know all the artists, what with that husband and that gallery of yours. Do you know some young man without too many ideas of his own, who won't ask the earth? These scene designers are the devil."

"I'd like to give some young chap a chance," Norman said, majestically, beginning to swell again.

"Fiddle!" said the old lady. "It's not a question of giving anyone a chance. I want someone cheap. Do you know anyone, Elinor?"

"I don't," Elinor began. "Oh, wait a minute. There was a boy I met this morning. Lydia Walsh said he did scene designing. I haven't the faintest idea what his stuff's like, but he looked as if he needed a job pretty badly. You might see him, and find out if he's any use to you. His name's Paul Fairless. Lydia will know where you can get hold of him."

"Sounds just the thing," said Betsy. "I'll get hold of Lydia to-morrow. She owes me fifty pounds. Do you suppose I could take it out of his fees?"

"I'm not sure I wouldn't rather have a name," Norman said, dubiously.

"I'm quite sure you would," said Betsy, serenely. "Some old fogey who's been painting roses on trellis work for the last fifty years. But this is my party and I'm going to enjoy it. And if you don't like it I can get someone else to conduct for me. There are lots of old codgers I can pick up beside you!"

"Now, now, Betsy," Elinor admonished. "Don't be naughty."

But Betsy was in fine fettle, and maintained her chaff and her banter for another half-hour, while Elinor gave way to badly disguised yawning, until at last even Norman noticed it and suggested taking her home.

"Well, Elinor," said Betsy, at the door, "it's been nice to see you, and I thought you might like to know that there's life in the old girl yet. I'll get hold of your young man in the morning. And you ought to do something about that habit of yours of yawning. It isn't everybody who'd understand."

It was one o'clock when Elinor got to bed, but, tired as she was, it was a long while before she fell asleep. Her mind went back over her day: the boy, Paul Fairless; the man, Gus Benford; Lydia Walsh, Norman and Betsy, with their ambitions and their worries, marched round and round in her head like the revolving puppets on a mediæval clock. Why did everybody always want to tell her everything? Why had she had to listen to all this opera business? They had not wanted her advice; she had known that, refraining from giving her opinion, which was that the scheme was foredoomed to failure. No, they just wanted to tell her. Oh, well, if that boy got a job out of it, it would make it worth while. His face disturbed her. The Morris Bairds; send him a copy of *The Rose Garden* to-morrow. Would that project come to anything? How would she set about dramatising it? Lunch with Julia Baird on Friday; she hadn't written that down. Wasn't it Friday she was going to lunch with Mrs. Anthony? No, that was next Monday; that was all right.

Mrs. Anthony lived in Hampstead, the Metropolitan Railway part. That meant it would take her three-quarters of an hour to get there; lunch at one, leave home at a quarter-past twelve, not get back till nearly four. What about work? Oh, hell, how the days went! What did people want to live all that way out for? Hampstead; people in Hampstead always said it was no farther than Kensington. But Hampstead was the suburbs, and Kensington wasn't. Kensington people and Hampstead people were quite different; but suppos-

ing someone from Hampstead moved to Kensington, would they change? Mrs. Anthony was a Hampstead person.

Elinor turned over in bed, and began to think about her. She was a gentle, slender lady, with soft grey eyes and prettily dressed brown hair, whom she had met in Rapallo three years before. Still quite young and pleasantly attractive, the widow of a solicitor whose death had left her very lonely, she was one of those women whom life seems somehow to have passed unnoticed. Yet why should one think that? She had married and borne two children, loved her husband and lost him; that was enough, wasn't it? It was, perhaps, rather that one felt that now there was nothing left to happen to her, that at forty-five her life was over; while in Elinor's set no one ever finished, no one ever gave up. What had Betsy said this evening: "There's life in the old girl yet"?

Mrs. Anthony and Hermione; there was a strange contrast, Elinor thought, in her friendships with these two women. Her relation with Mrs. Anthony was a curious one, based largely on the affection which had developed between Elinor and Evelyn, the seventeen-year-old daughter, an affection which had passed from a schoolgirl rave into what was now a genuine devotion to the older woman. Mrs. Anthony watched this friendship with a quiet surprise and an occasional mild protest at the trouble it must give Elinor, wondering now and then whether she were really a good influence for the child, and then reassuring herself with the thought that she seemed a nice, sensible, intelligent woman, and with the memory of her newspaper articles, which were always simple and homely and everything that a mother could wish. Also, she liked her face, and Mrs. Anthony was a great believer in faces. She only wished that Elinor took better care of her hands.

Herself, she was always beautifully tidy and charmingly dressed, wearing clothes of quiet colours, blues and greys, that toned with her gentle prettiness. She liked having Elinor to lunch in her spotlessly kept house,

with its white paint and soft thick carpets, its rooms slightly over-crowded with the Delft and pewter and prints and engravings that her husband had collected. She liked talking to her about her children, especially her boy Jack, who was articled to a solicitor and wanted to be a writer; and about her three sisters who lived abroad, in Brussels, Nice and Florence. She visited them a good deal; she was delicate in health, hating the cold, and liked to spend her winters in the South. When she was away, a fourth sister, who was unmarried, looked after Jack and Evelyn.

Elinor lay reflecting on Mrs. Anthony's daily life, compared with the others that she knew: the daily life of shopping in Finchley Road or Oxford Street, lunch alone at home or occasionally up West, when she went to the matinées of what she called "good plays," bridge and tea-parties with other Hampstead ladies, and evenings spent in reading the books from her *Times* library subscription, while Jack sat fidgeting and talking and pretending to study his *Stephen's Commentaries*, or writing the stories that he tried to get into the reviews. Mrs. Anthony hardly ever went out in the evening, unless it were with Jack. It seemed a comfortable, easy life to Elinor. "God, how I could work if I lived like that!" she thought. A house with good servants; regular hours; regular meals; regular bedtime. She fell asleep to the thought of it.

## V

THREE days after their first meeting she dined with Gus Benford at the Embassy, and found him gay, charming and very *de luxe*. Also, he made her laugh a great deal. The following week they went together to the matinée of a play, which they joined in hating, against the judgment, apparently, of all the dramatic critics and the whole London theatre-going public. Their rage against the ineptitudes of stereotyped, would-be smart comedy and the arch coyness of the leading lady, sent them, in a shared bad temper, which was a strong link of sympathy, to revive themselves with drink at Elinor's flat.

This was his first introduction to her background. Angie was just packing up for the night when they arrived, and he was very charming and polite to her; so much so, indeed, that she even ventured to say: "What a very nice man he seemed, Miss Johnson," when Elinor mentioned his name a day or two later. He sat looking round him while Elinor got out the drinks.

"Is this place your own, or furnished?" he asked her, as she handed him his glass.

"My own. Why? Don't you like it?"

"It looks very comfortable," he hedged.

"But you don't approve of it?"

"It tells me a lot about you."

"That I'm very untidy, I suppose," she said, a shade wearily.

"More than that. It tells me that you don't really care about *things*. As a matter of fact, I saw that this afternoon."

On their way back from the matinée he had taken her to a shop in King Street, St. James's, saying that

he wanted to show her something that he rather liked. The something had proved to be a beautiful and very costly Persian bowl, and they had gone into the shop, where he had spent a long time looking round and talking to an assistant, showing a considerable knowledge of period furniture and decoration. Elinor had grown bored, and had fidgeted until he noticed it. All that he had said was, "You're tired," and taken her straight home by taxi; but he returned to the incident now.

"It's true," Elinor said, in answer to his accusation. "I don't really care for things. At least, I've no sense of possessions. I'm probably one of the few people in the world who think that museums, or other people's houses, are the proper places for works of art. I like looking at beautiful things, but, funnily enough, I've never wanted to own them."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. It's something I find very hard to explain. But, for example, I loved that bowl of yours this afternoon; I thought it was perfectly beautiful, but it would give me awfully little pleasure to possess it. I'd like having it to look at, and to handle, for a bit, I suppose, but it would bother me. I'd have to be so careful about it, and I'd hate that. I hate feeling that I've got a clean pinny on, and mustn't spill anything. Besides, I'd be so miserable if anything did happen to it. A couple of years ago I suddenly decided to treat myself to a really smart dressing-case for week-ends and travelling, so I bought just about the nicest I could find, and loved it while it was all new and sleek; but every scratch it got was like a scratch on my heart. It just wasn't worth it . . . giving my heart to a bag to tear. In the end, I almost felt I wanted to kick it round the room and do it in at one go. Can't you understand that? No, I suppose you can't. You obviously love possessions and looking after them."

"I do," said Gus. "I love beautiful things. I can't afford many of them, but if I'm ever rich enough I mean to have a really beautiful house, and to fill it with really beautiful things."



"And not have one comfortable room?" she asked. "Not one room in the whole place where you can drop ash and spill coffee, without minding? Oh, I get the fidgets so badly in 'really beautiful houses.' I don't want there to be anything I can't put my feet on. But it goes deeper than that. I find myself getting so irritated with people when they talk furniture. I can't bear those long, serious conversations about a little shop, somewhere near the Odéon, where you can get a special kind of glass, or whatever it is. I'd so much rather go out and buy a dozen at Woolworth's. It's something wanting in me, I know."

"Yes, I think it is," he said reflectively. "It seems strange to me, too. You've got a sense of beauty. I can't understand your wanting to keep it stored away in a museum, so to speak. I can't understand how you can bear to have 'wrongness' around you."

"Wrongness?" she queried.

"Yes. This room: it's wrong. I dare say it's comfortable, but there's not one thing in it that's pleasing to look at, except that cabinet and those rugs."

"Personally, I find that sofa extremely pleasing to look at," she said lightly. "Pleasing, and most inviting. But I know you're right, really. It's just something that's got left out of my make-up, that's all."

"What *do* you care about, then?" he asked. "Places? People?"

"I like places," she answered, "but I like them in just that same way, the museum way. As for people, I need them just as I need food. I can't get along without them; I'm not a solitary person; I like to be among people, lots of them—it stimulates me—but with about two exceptions, they're not individually essential to me. No, I suppose what I care about most is books. Does that sound priggish and pretentious? I don't mean it that way, and I don't mean first editions or beautiful bindings, either. I just mean what's inside them. Literature. It's terrifically important to me; more important than real life, almost. I think in terms of literature, things I've got from it. Don't you?"

"N—no," he hesitated. "I don't think I do. At least, not in the way you mean. I think in terms of art, perhaps."

"Yes, that's not what I mean. I can see that in your work. The form means more to you than the material."

"Don't you like my work?" he asked, smiling. "You can tell me. I shan't burst into tears. Don't you like it?"

"Not to my heart," she confessed.

"Do *you* think it's wrist-watch?"

"Yes, I think I do. In a literary sense, that is, not socially. And I expect you think mine's slovenly and unimportant, so supposing we don't bother about it?"

He laughed, and the conversation changed, turning to literature in general. He began to look round her shelves, and to take books down, reading bits aloud, and later to dip into them, chatting to her, while she dashed in and out of her bedroom and bathroom, dressing for a dinner engagement. When it was time for her to go, he stopped her suddenly in the doorway, took her by the shoulders, looked at her, smiling, and then kissed her.

The next morning she received by post a very witty and cruel burlesque which he had written on the play they had seen, and she was immensely amused by it. In the afternoon he sent her flowers: daffodils, narcissi, tulips and mimosa, and, with them, a long letter about nothing—a letter which, like his books, was brilliant and highly polished; but, unlike his books, it did not annoy her, because it was written to her, its wit a personal compliment to her, or so it seemed. Her meeting with Gus had given a definitely new flavour to her life, flattering and pleasurable. It was a long time since she had been so intrigued by anyone; he amused her, and he had the capacity for making her feel important and attractive. He 'featured' her, to use the phrase that came to her mind, as a manager features a star actress in a play.

She realised that she was drifting towards an affair with him, but she was in no hurry for things to reach that point. She was enjoying herself sufficiently as they

were, but she had decided that he was someone whom she would like to have in her life as a companion and entertainer, and she knew that that was not going to be possible for long without her becoming his mistress. His kiss, that afternoon, had told her that.

She rang him up to thank him for the flowers and for his letter, and they talked for half an hour, gaily. The conversation left her with a sense of warm, chuckling amusement which stayed with her all the evening, causing her again and again to look up from the book that she was reading and to smile at the memory of something he had said. It was late when she switched off her light, and settled down for sleep with a pleasant, enveloping feeling of contentment.

She was awakened half an hour later by the telephone, which she had forgotten to take into the bedroom with her. With a curse, she leaped out of bed and ran, shivering, in her pyjamas, into the sitting-room.

It was Winkie on the telephone—Winkie upset, working herself into a state of hysteria, and obviously enjoying the process.

"Is that you, Elinor?" she said. "Listen. I've got to see you. Something's happened. Something awful. I don't know what to do. I must see you. Can you come round here? Oh, but you must. Well, you can *get* dressed, can't you? Elinor, you must. I shall go mad. I shall kill myself, if you don't. I really shall. I'm not just being dramatic. I mean it."

"What is it? What's happened?" Elinor demanded.

"I can't tell you like this—not on the telephone. I've *got* to see you! Yes, I'm dressed, only I've been crying so that I'm not fit to be seen. Oh, all right, I'll come round to you, then. I do think it's selfish of you, though, making me come out when I'm all upset like this. I'll be right round."

Elinor put down the receiver, struggled into a dressing-gown, carried a tray with whisky and cigarettes into her bedroom, rubbed her eyes vigorously, and threw herself on the bed to read and smoke until Winkie should arrive.

Presently she heard the bell, and clattered downstairs in her mules, shivering at the night air as she admitted Winkie, who was far less dishevelled than might have been expected from her description of her condition on the telephone. She was, in fact, looking extremely childlike, wearing evening-dress and an opera cloak with a huge, billowing, white fur collar.

It appeared that Goronwy had accused her of having a lover, and Winkie's indignation was spectacular and went on for a very long time, at the end of which she pulled herself up, asked for a drink, settled down cosily with one, and then said:

"Now tell me what you think."

Elinor thought a lot, but Winkie was elusive, and no one knew more about her private life than she meant them to. She could be so magnificently voluble and confidential and ridiculous, so embarrassingly unreticent on so many matters, that it was always a long time before anyone realised the gaps in her narratives. Elinor and Hermione and the others were in the habit of seeing her quite frequently, but they had found, too, that there were often periods when she was unavailable, periods never wholly accounted for, concerning which her memory, afterwards, went curiously blank. No one could be vaguer than Winkie when she wanted to, and baby-talk covered a number of mysteries. It was, therefore, rather difficult for Elinor to answer the present question.

"What I think?" she echoed. "What do you mean?"

"Well," said Winkie, "what am I going to do?"

"What's Goronwy going to do?"

"My dear, I don't know."

"But what did he say?"

"Well, he swore. I must say I rather admired him for it. I didn't know he had it in him. He called me a harlot. Is that libel? As a matter of fact, I don't think it meant anything. I mean, it's in the Bible, isn't it?—and the Welsh always quote the Bible when they get excited. He said I was beneath contempt. Beneath

contempt! I like that! He'll apologise for that. He'll apologise, or I'll never speak to him again."

"Winkie, don't be a fool," said Elinor sternly. "Has he talked about divorce, or anything?"

"Yes, he's talked about it," Winkie admitted, "but I don't think he means it. At least, I don't think he will if I don't want him to. But, I mean, ought I to stay with him after this?"

"Well, where would you go, if you didn't?"

"I can always go back to the stage," Winkie said calmly. "You know I've wanted to all the time, only he stood out against it because of his position, and the Tabernacle at home, or something. You know he's always been wanting me to have a child; my God, I'm thankful now that I haven't! Of course, he's still in love with me, and I know I could get him back if I liked, but I'm not sure that it wouldn't be wiser to make this the complete break. I mean, after all I've put up with for his sake, and the way I've stood by him, and never let anyone make fun of him, this is how he repays it, accusing me like this!"

"Yes, darling," Elinor said, stifling a gigantic yawn. "I know. But it's getting a little late. Don't you think it would be a good idea if you were to go home now? You don't have to leave him to-night, anyway."

"I suppose it would," Winkie rose, stretching herself. "Won't you come with me? I can't go walking about the streets alone like this."

"No, Winkie, I won't. We should only look like a couple of tarts on the prowl," Winkie giggled. "Why not ring up a taxi?"

"No, I don't want to go home," Winkie said petulantly. "Not to him. I won't go home, not unless you'll come with me. Why don't you come and stay with me for a bit? It would make things a lot easier. I do think you might. At any rate, take me home. I can't just walk in alone. Why shouldn't I stay here?" she said, with a sudden thought. "Yes, that's a good idea. Can I? That'll teach him a lesson all right when he finds I've not been home all night. Then, when I've decided

what to do, you can go and talk to him for me. I can stay, can't I?"

"I don't know where you'll sleep," said Elinor.

"Can't I get into your bed? I shan't take up much room."

"No, you can't," said Elinor, with sudden definiteness. "You can have the divan in the other room, if that's any good, though I think you're a fool to stay, when you've got your own comfortable bedroom at home all to yourself, and Goronwy not even on the same floor. It isn't as though you shared a room."

"No, we've never done that since the first three months," said Winkie, with a certain pride in her voice. "But I won't go home. I don't mind having the divan. I've slept in lots of worse places than this. Don't forget, I used to be on tour. I'd like to stay. You're such a comfort, Elinor. You *are* a good sort. You've got some blankets and things, haven't you? Can you get them?"

She remained sitting on the bed, sipping her whisky, while Elinor got up, pulled out blankets, sheets and pillows from a cupboard, converted the divan into a bed, and lent her a pair of pyjamas. Then she undressed, strewing her clothes all round the sitting-room, annexed the stove, clambered on to the divan, where she snuggled down among the pillows, and started to resume her indignation through the open door. At last, at a quarter to five, Elinor screamed: "Shut up, Winkie, for God's sake, and go to sleep, can't you?" and Winkie grumbly complied.

Mrs. Moggridge, bringing in Elinor's orange-juice next morning, wanted to know whether "the young person on the sofa" would be wanting anything for breakfast, and what she was expected to do about dusting, with her lying there in the middle of the room like that. Elinor told her to leave it, and not disturb Lady Lloyd-Ellis. Winkie awoke with Angie's arrival, clamoured for coffee and grape-fruit, and remained prone the whole morning, chain-smoking, listening to Elinor dictating, and offering comments on her telephone calls. She interrupted several times to ask Angie

to ring up numbers for her, cancelling appointments, and expressed her admiration for Elinor's method of working.

"You are clever, Elinor," she said. "I don't know how you do it, I really don't. Just sitting there and pouring it out like that. I don't know how you think of all the words. I jolly well know I couldn't."

After that she relapsed into brooding on her own affairs, and then, after half an hour's silence, suddenly announced:

"I shall go away. I shall go to Biarritz. Why don't you come with me, Elinor?"

"Winkie darling, I've got my work to do."

"Well, you can write anywhere, can't you? You can bring Little Uplift here along. I do think you might."

Elinor refused agreeably, and Winkie went on smoking. Presently Hermione rang up, to give Elinor the latest contemptuous details of the Norman-Betsy opera scheme.

"Is that Hermione?" Winkie interrupted. "Ask her if she'll come to Biarritz with me."

"Winkie wants to know if you'll come to Biarritz with her? I don't know, dear, I suppose she wants a holiday. No, Winkie," she turned back, "Hermione says she can't. She's much too busy."

"I shall get Nancy to come," Winkie said contentedly, and asked Angie to turn on a bath for her.

Amidst these interruptions, with Winkie, who had risen, wandering aimlessly around in her borrowed pyjamas, apparently unable to make up her mind to get into the bath, Elinor's morning's work proceeded. By half-past twelve she had dictated the draft of a thousand-word newspaper article to the effect that what happiness meant to a woman was a home, and someone to care for, and someone to care for her.

"Oh, I do think that's so true," said Winkie, emerging from the bathroom and overhearing the final paragraph. "I've always wanted someone to look after. I've always thought that if there were only someone who really *needed* me, I wouldn't care how poor he was or anything."

I mean, money doesn't really matter a bit, if you're in love. I remember when I was on tour, there was a boy in the company I was simply crazy about. He had a weak chest, and I used to put him to bed, and rub it for him, and give him hot milk and everything. Do you know, I think that was the happiest time of my life, just looking after him like that? Funny, isn't it?"

She returned to the divan and became reminiscent and philosophical, until Elinor shut her up. Then she rang up Nancy and asked her to go to Biarritz with her. Elinor went out to lunch.

On her way home she paid a visit to the little picture-gallery in Sackville Street in which she owned a half-interest. She wanted to make arrangements for the exhibition of Roly's pictures, and spent half an hour talking to her partner and the staff. The former, named Belinda, was an active dot of a woman, dressed in cretonne, with white shingled hair, who lived in two rooms above the gallery. She was an earnest diet fiend, and existed almost entirely on lettuce, apples and nuts. The staff consisted of an elderly, taciturn Scotsman, with very dusty clothes.

It was Belinda who was mainly responsible for the running of the gallery. Elinor had helped her out with capital at a difficult period, and took a sporadic interest in the management, descending on the place about once a fortnight, when she went through it like a draughty gust of air. This afternoon she wandered round the office, dictating letters and looking at papers, press-cuttings, estimates and bills, while Belinda stood, with her hands folded across her stomach, placidly waiting for her to finish.

"Elinor, you're looking rotten," she said at length. "What have you been doing?"

"Everything that you disapprove of, darling," Elinor retorted. "Specially, eating sausages."

"You shouldn't," Belinda urged, "really, you shouldn't. Sausages of all things. You don't know what they put in them; you don't know what they're made of. I'd rather die than eat a sausage." She went over to



her. "Look at me," she said, and then, reaching up, she pulled down the lower lids of Elinor's eyes to inspect the whites, sighed and shook her head.

"What do you see?" Elinor laughed. "Belinda darling, it's no use. I'm not going to give up eating, even to please you. What did *you* have for dinner last night?"

"I had two boiled potatoes and an apple," Belinda answered. "Oh, it's all very well for you to laugh, but you'll be sorry one day. I haven't known a day's illness since I started this, ten years ago. I *wish* I could persuade you to try it."

"You can't," retorted Elinor. "Sorry, darling, but I'm not going to live on potato droppings and cabbage water for anyone. I've read all those health papers of yours. I know."

The old man, who was one of Belinda's converts, looked up from his work.

"Ye're a verra foolish woman," he grunted, "and a verra unhealthy one, by the sound of your diet and the look of your finger-nails." Elinor jumped. "Oh yes, I've seen the white spots on them, many a time and oft. Uric acid, that's what that is. Ye'll drop dead one day when ye're the age of Belinda here, that's what ye'll do. Drop down dead in the street or a 'bus, like as not."

"Will you guarantee that?" Elinor asked eagerly. "There's no way I'd sooner die, unless it were in my sleep. And then I could never be sure of being alone," she added.

"Elinor!" Belinda protested, laughing.

"No good, darling. Give it up. I must go. You'd better have Roly round and talk to him, and don't let him get too reminiscent about me." She turned to the old man. "I suggest you take Belinda out to dinner and treat her to a nice beef-steak. Good-bye."

She left them shaking their heads with affectionate indulgence, and returned home to find that Winkie had gone. Angie explained that Lady Lloyd-Ellis had insisted on Mrs. Moggridge cooking some lunch for

the two of them, and their eating it together in the sitting-room.

"I didn't know what to do, Miss Johnson," she faltered. "I told her I always went out to my lunch, but she wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. She said that it was too late for her to go home, and that she couldn't go out because she was in evening-dress, and that she couldn't be left alone. I do hope you don't mind, but I really didn't know what to do."

"What did she talk to you about?" Elinor asked.

"She told me a lot about her married life," said Angie, dubiously. "It doesn't seem to have been very happy, does it? But she wasn't very clear about a lot of it. At least, I mean I couldn't understand it, but I expect I'm very stupid. Then she rang up Mrs. Rossiter again, and asked her to go home with her, and Mrs. Rossiter came and fetched her in the car. Are they very great friends?"

"They never have been," murmured Elinor, with a chuckle. She found the picture of Angie receiving Winkie's confidences quite irresistible. "Well, now she's gone, we can have a little peace. Give me that article, and let's see just how bad it is."

"I thought Lady Lloyd-Ellis had very nice ideas," said Angie, complying, "what she said about looking after someone, I mean."

"Lord bless you, child, Winkie's never looked after anyone in her life," Elinor assured her.

"Oh, but she said . . ." Angie began, and then stopped. "You don't mean it wasn't true?" she asked.

"Never mind what I mean," Elinor pulled herself up. "I've wasted quite enough time on Winkie to-day, and quite enough sleep last night, too."

For a time she tried to work, but she felt exhausted, and presently yawning became too much for her. Finally she capitulated, and allowed Angie to tuck her up with an eiderdown and a hot-water bottle on her bed, where she slept for two hours.

In the evening she dined, amusingly, with Gus and, after dinner, discovered that he was an exquisite dancer.

When she commented on it, he laughed and told her of a brief period in 1919 when, after leaving the Army, he had quarrelled with a respectable bourgeois home in Chester and gone to live in Paris, where, when his money showed signs of giving out, he had earned more by hiring a studio and a gramophone and giving dancing lessons, so expensive that they became the fashionable thing. He related a number of stories of this portion of his life, stories with an unabashed flavour of the autobiography of a gigolo, some of which caused Elinor slightly to gasp at their complete shamelessness, which yet attracted her. He talked a little, too, of his present existence, living in an expensive tiny flat in Pall Mall, with a crowded engagement book, and of his milieu, which seemed social rather than literary or artistic. His conversation had, at moments, a faint tang of the gossip page of a daily paper, but he was a good talker, and, for the most part, they found sufficient stimulus in each other's wit and sense of humour to make trivialities entertaining.

After they had been dancing for a while, he said suddenly:

"Let's chuck this and go back to your flat, or mine, shall we?"

Elinor realised that the moment had come for a decision—the decision whether or not she was going on with this. If she wanted to retreat, this was the last moment at which she could do so; their intimacy had been swift and was already at its climax. If she wanted to keep Gus she must become his mistress now. It had come sooner than she had expected, but she had no wish to withdraw; she was enjoying herself, and did not hesitate. They went back to her flat.

## VI

JULIA BAIRD'S project for the dramatisation of *The Rose Garden* had matured. Morris Baird had come back from his trip to Germany, full of enthusiasm for the book and its possibilities as a play, and that enthusiasm, even couched as it was in violent American slang and blasphemy, was infectious. When he said: "Jesus, but it'll make a swell play," called Elinor "Sweetie" and "Honeybunch," stood her an elaborate lunch at the Carlton without his wife, and told her racy anecdotes of the great stars who had been under his management and of the authors whose work he had produced, she began to catch theatre fever from him. She had never before come into contact to any extent with the successful world of the stage, her acquaintance being limited to the more struggling middle ranks of the profession; and the picture that Morris Baird offered her of the top of the theatrical tree, the casual way in which he introduced her at their Carlton lunch to three or four of London and New York's most celebrated stage figures, gave her an almost childlike thrill of excitement. It was silly, she knew, to be so dazzled by limelight, but life seemed suddenly to have taken a new and rather dazzling turn. Morris Baird also "featured" her for the time being.

She re-read *The Rose Garden* with mixed emotions; curiously, faintly irritated at its excellence, as though she grudged it, much as a jealous author might grudge the merits of a newer, younger writer's work. Then, too, she found it, at first, a bore to have to take up her interest in it once again, to re-conceive it, to cast back to herself at twenty, as she had been when she wrote it. There was an optimism and a faith in the book which were almost a reproach to her. She took a

strange pleasure in its defects, as though anxious to assure herself that her work had improved since she wrote it. She was a little surprised to find how keen was the emotion it evoked in her.

But this mood was only temporary. Once she had re-absorbed the book she found a fascination in recasting its story into a new form, and threw herself into the work of dramatising it with zest, although she protested that the task reminded her of nothing so much as of eating stale tripe. Angie was thrilled with the work and remembered the original far better than Elinor. The first draft of the dramatic version was finished in three weeks and dispatched to Morris Baird, who sent for her and considerably dashed her spirits with a long lecture on playwriting.

"How long do you think this would play," he asked her, "just sheer playing time, without any intermission?" Elinor didn't know. "Well, I'll tell you. At a rough estimate, four and a half hours. You just go home and cut two hours out of it, and see if you can't push your nine scenes into three acts while you're about it. I don't like all these changes of set; they cost money and they're a waste of time. The stuff's there all right, but it's got to be the hell of a lot better before it's any good to me."

This was a blow. Elinor took the manuscript home and coped with it. She had written her first draft in a spirit of rash optimism. Her second was achieved with real hard labour, and much disappointment from Angie at the incidents, speeches and characters which had ruthlessly to be eliminated. Twice Elinor resolved to throw up the job and let some playwright do the work for her, but Angie begged her to stick to it herself.

"Oh, don't let anyone else touch it," she pleaded. "Please, don't! You don't know how they'll ruin it. It's so dainty and fresh and charming as you've done it; you don't want anyone else to come in and spoil it. I'm sure it's only a matter of work. After all, you've never written a play before, have you? But I'm sure you can do it, if you try." She even went so far as to

offer to get her William Archer's book on *Playmaking* from the library.

Curiously enough, Gus took much the same view, although he disapproved of the venture.

"But if you must mix yourself up in the theatre," he said, "for God's sake do it yourself. I don't really like *The Rose Garden*. It's sentimental and immature and schoolgirlish, but if you let anyone else take a hand in it, they'll only make it a thousand times more so."

"Do you know, Gus," Elinor smiled, "it's a curious thing: one hates and gets sick to death of the people who praise one for something one wrote years ago—I always want to hit them when they come and burble to me about how much they like *The Rose Garden*—but there's another and worse specimen—the people who praise your last book and then say, brightly, 'You know, I didn't like *The Rose Garden*,' expecting you're going to love them for it. Curiously enough, you don't."

However, she plodded on with her adaptation, and this time Morris Baird accepted it.

It was his project to produce it first in London, in conjunction with an English manager, and then, if it proved a success, to put it on in New York in the autumn by himself. Elinor found herself summoned to conferences, consulted as to casting and settings, and treated with a deference and a consideration which greatly surprised her.

This was, indeed, the beginning of a very full and happy time for her. Between her play and all its attendant circumstance on the one hand, and Gus on the other, she had little time left for her own work, and indeed rather deliberately let it go, throwing herself whole-heartedly into the enjoyment of a new and luxurious life. Angie found herself often unemployed; she would sit reading for hours in the flat with nothing to do, while Elinor was gallivanting somewhere; she received presents of unexpected afternoons of leisure, when Elinor would dismiss her at lunch-time, saying she would not want her until next morning, and that she had better go and have her hair cut, or sit in the

park, or go home and read an improving book. She began to feel quite demoralised and to discover or invent little jobs about the flat, mending cushions or darning Elinor's stockings, in order to feel that she was earning her salary.

Elinor quite recklessly let everything slide, with joy in the gesture. It amused her to go and sit through bad plays with Gus in order to inspect some actor or actress with a view to their suitability for her cast; or to dine with him late and long, and go to music-halls or melodramas in out-of-the-way theatres. It was a long time since she had known anyone with whom she could so completely share her sense of amusement. She was not in love with him, nor he with her, but they entertained each other, giving no thought to the future, grateful for the chance that had thrown them together, happy in their relationship, which they seemed, somehow, to have taken up in the middle.

They saw each other as much as they could, but almost always alone. She made an attempt to introduce him to some of her friends, but it was unsuccessful. He was polite, but completely aloof, and it afforded her a slight amusement to watch the struggles of Nancy and Hermione to annex him as a celebrity and a decoration to their parties, when he was so obviously determined not to be annexed. He, on his side, made no such attempt to bring her into his life, so that their meetings, though frequent, were snatched: by her, from the dozen other things that she ought to have been doing, and, by him, from she knew not what obligations of social intercourse, giving her always the sense of rather deliciously playing truant when they were together, which doubled her pleasure in him. Very often he would come round to her Mews at midnight from some dinner-party. They spent two week-ends together in the country.

In the midst of all this Evelyn Anthony came home from school, which threatened to introduce a complication, since Elinor was in the habit of spending a good deal of time with her every holiday. Evelyn had curiously made herself a part of her life. When Elinor had met her

first at Rapallo she had been a child of fourteen, with a taste for novels above her years; she had read three of Elinor's, and the excitement of meeting the authoress had driven her to the wildest hero-worship. When she returned to England and to boarding-school, she began to write to her, letters at first of fiery adoration and, later, of intense adolescent introspection.

"I seem to be so many different people all at once," she wrote. "I never seem to know which is the real 'me,' because every 'me' seems to be thinking all the time whether it's being me, and the real 'me' ought never to think about itself at all. Or ought it? Is it only by losing oneself that one can find oneself?"

That was the kind of thing. It was all a little worrying, although quite natural. She had tried it on her mother and met with no response; but Elinor, unwilling to disappoint an illusion and a childish need for sympathy and understanding, had done her best to answer, to turn Evelyn gently and imperceptibly from all this self-conscious questioning, and to guide her very promiscuous taste in literature, bringing down on herself more and more letters and, during the holidays, long confidences and conversations. But it was a new experience for her, and she welcomed it, giving the child a great deal of her time, taking her to matinées and picture-galleries, having her about the flat, where it gave her intense pleasure to sit curled up on the sofa with a book, listening to Elinor dictate, or re-arranging her shelves for her. Mrs. Anthony was abroad a great deal, and Evelyn was frequently alone. It was a little awkward, however, to have her return now when her life was suddenly so full of new interests.

It happened that the first time she came to see her this holiday, Gus rang up to know if he might come to tea, and this awoke Elinor to a new problem, even though she solved it, five minutes after it occurred to her, by deciding to treat it as non-existent. She had introduced Evelyn to very few of her friends, but the need or the opportunity had never arisen; there was really no reason at all why she and Gus should not meet. She was surprised



with herself for having, even momentarily, considered complicating the situation by endeavouring to keep them apart; annoyed, and also a little puzzled at the thought having come into her mind at all.

The fact that it had done so suggested to her that she was not quite sure of Gus as a person, not quite sure how much she trusted him, how much she liked him, beyond enjoying his company as an entertainer and a lover. She put this doubt from her, almost equally quickly, as disloyal; but yet it worried her. Ignoring the problem, or, rather, refusing to admit it, did not dispose of the vague uneasiness in her mind which persisted even after Gus and Evelyn had first met. Gus had behaved very nicely, and Elinor's more definite fears had been largely allayed, which made it easier for her now to try and discover what had prompted them.

She refused to believe that they had been due to any mistrust of Gus, nor, looking into her own life, did she find the solution there. It lay rather in Evelyn and in the responsibility she felt towards Mrs. Anthony concerning her. Mrs. Anthony, although she knew little or nothing of Elinor's private life, was probably broad-minded enough to be tolerant of it as far as she, herself, was concerned, but it was more than likely that, if she knew of it, she might consider Elinor an unsuitable friend for her daughter. Yet Elinor herself had never had any misgivings on this score. In the first place she had no scruples about her own life; what she did was her own concern and harmed no one else, and she could trust herself always to conform to Mrs. Anthony's standards towards Evelyn. What she could not be so sure of was how far she could trust her friends in this direction, which was why she had refrained from allowing Evelyn to meet them, hesitating even when the child expressed her longing to know other celebrated authors of her acquaintance. Gus, however, at their first meeting, had absolved himself from this suspicion.

But in any case her position as regards Evelyn was a difficult one. She had, she realised, no right to influence

the girl's life in any direction which her mother might not approve, as, for example, by introducing her to a circle which might perhaps take her up, bringing her into contact with people whose way of life differed, as Elinor knew only too well that the lives of her friends differed, from the ideas which Mrs. Anthony had for her daughter. Not that Elinor was tempted to do so. She was sufficiently aware of the general unsatisfactoriness of her own existence to appreciate the virtues of the Hampstead life, which would lead Evelyn by natural stages the way that her mother had gone, to matrimony and child-bearing and an ordered life of comfort. The other thing did not make for happiness, and Gus, she felt, had stood in her mind, considering their relationship, as a symbol for it, which accounted perhaps for her momentary reluctance to bring him and Evelyn together.

She tried to explain some of this to him after he had first met the child.

"Yes, I know," he said. "But why this sudden championing of suburban respectability?"

"It's not that," Elinor replied. "You can make it sound silly if you like, but it goes deeper than suburban respectability. All of us *are* floundering about in a kind of mess that a girl like Evelyn need never come in contact with. She doesn't belong to it. She's not on in our act. And I happen rather to like *her* act."

"That's the act where she marries and lives happily ever after, isn't it?"

"Why do you sneer at it?"

"My dear, I don't. I'm a little amused at *you*, that's all."

"I do believe it's the best way, though, Gus. Especially if you're brought up to it, as Evelyn is. Marriage and children every time. And our set isn't exactly conducive to that."

"I'd like to remind you, dear, that even in our immoral set people occasionally marry, *and* have children," he laughed. "You even married yourself. And look what *that* was! And that wasn't the fault

of a bad upbringing, either, from the little I know of your background."

"No, it wasn't," she admitted. "I married Roly because I was young and a fool, and because I was in love with him."

"Yes, dear. And because you didn't know anything about men. By all the logic of that, I feel I ought to take your Evelyn to Paris, and show her the night-life."

"I was alone," she went on. "Let's hope she won't be. Roly would never have come my way if I'd been living as she is, as I hope she'll continue to be when she's the age I was. I don't think Mrs. Anthony is ideal as a mother by any means. I don't think she understands Evelyn. But I've no right to interfere with her ideas for her, and in the matter of this I wouldn't want to. I'm all on the side of the angels, there."

"Ye—es," he said reflectively. "You don't by any chance happen to think that the way *you're* living is wrong, though, do you? You're not developing a conscience?"

"No," she answered. "I don't think it's wrong—not for me, anyway. But I do think it's a bit of a pity, though. It's a messy sort of second best, if you'll forgive my saying so," she added, with a smile. "And quite apart from her mother, I've got a feeling about Evelyn herself. She needn't know about all that sort of thing. Let her go on reading about it and thinking it's horrid. I like her to have an ideal. There's something in her I'd like to see kept . . . as it is."

"What?" he asked. "What is this quality you're so keen on? Innocence? Purity?"

"No," Elinor objected, irritably. "That's maudlin."

"Is it? I wonder if you aren't a little maudlin about her yourself? Can you find a name for it that isn't maudlin?"

"She's . . ." Elinor sought for a word, "unspoiled. Young, anyway."

"Young?" Gus echoed. "Yes. That's what you admire in her. All right, but don't sentimentalise it."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I'm not suggesting you should swear or talk bawdy in front of the child, or tell her about your love life, or introduce her to any disreputable friends you may have, but don't put too high a value on innocence, as innocence. I know it's a pretty picture, but are you quite sure that her innocence would appeal to you as much if she had protruding teeth and a spotty complexion, instead of being the pretty kid she is? I must say I'd rather imagined when you talked about her that she'd be all co-educated in a tunic, but I'm not at all sure that it isn't the general early-morning-on-a-spring-day effect that's warping your judgment."

"I wonder if you're right?" Elinor reflected.

"I know I'm right. It's dangerous, that. It's the same quality that makes old men take what they think is a fatherly interest in little girls—the admiration of innocence for its appearance. And what about yourself?" he asked her. "You don't want her to know that women take lovers—women who aren't, to all intents and purposes, harlots, that is? You were afraid of my meeting her because we're having an affair, weren't you?"

"No," Elinor protested.

"Oh yes, just a little, until you saw how stupid it was. Now, supposing somehow she found out; supposing one day she should come and ask you? What then?"

"Then I'd lie," said Elinor. "Black over white."

"Why?"

"Because I feel I owe a responsibility towards her to cherish her beliefs. I can't let her down in that."

"Yet you don't think it worth while living up to them yourself? Of course you don't. You know they're impracticable."

"For me," said Elinor. "Not for her. I tell you I want her to have an ideal. No, not chastity, or purity, or any of these words, but I want her to have the ideal that I once believed in—if you like, that I still believe in—for her, or anybody like her. She's got it now, and it's up to me to see she keeps it."

"And then let her come a cropper the way you did?"

Why not tell her the truth about yourself? Not now, perhaps, but later. Why not explain, if you must, why you believe in all this other thing; because you haven't had it, and you feel you've made a mess of your life?"

"No," she reiterated. "There's no need. There's no need for her to know."

"You know," he said, "I'm not at all sure that this friendship isn't a damned serious mistake. I've no objection to your lying to her, provided you know what you're doing. If it's for her mother's sake, good enough, but don't get sentimental about it. She's the child of a suburban mother, and she comes of a class and set which pretends that sex and sex-relations are something to be ashamed of. You want her to stay in that set. Well, all right, so long as you realise it."

She could not argue with him. She was aware that her motives were confused, that it might be true, as he had said, that what she was doing was to sentimentalise pictorial virginity, but she held on to her ideals for Evelyn with a blind fanaticism that argued by faith and not by reason. Her brain went round in a circle.

"Oh, to hell with a Puritan conscience!" she cried aloud to herself at last, in furious exasperation. "What did my father want to go and marry a New Englander for, anyway?"

She took Evelyn out to lunch a day or two later.

Superficially, the girl was not unlike her mother, grey-eyed and with the same modelling of head, although her hair was darker, but there was a nervous vitality and intensity in her looks, and a way that her face had of suddenly extinguishing itself in shadow and then of kindling equally suddenly to life again, which suggested that she would never attain the calm, gentle prettiness of Mrs. Anthony. Evelyn was frequently called pretty, but the word was an ill-chosen one. It was probable that she might grow into loveliness, but it would be the windy loveliness of young trees and troubled water gustily lit by sun, never the still, unruffled sweetness of her mother, which suggested a shallow pool on a sunny, pale October day.

"The situation at home's a little strained," Evelyn said. "Jack appears to have been working behind my back, trying to persuade Mother to move into a flat somewhere. He's got an idea that Hampstead's suburban, or at least that the part we live in is. You know he's started moving in artistic circles where everybody lives in a studio or a cellar, and he's ashamed to ask them home because of the furniture. Well, the drawing-room is rather awful, I'll admit, with all the gilt chairs and water-colours, but I'm opposing the flat idea hard. We should all be so on top of each other, and when I come home from school I jolly well want a sitting-room to myself, or else a really decent-sized bedroom, like I've got now."

"Is your mother thinking of it?"

"Yes, thinking. You know how she worships Jack, and my being away at school two-thirds of the year does give him a bit of an advantage in getting his own way I've always wished that Mother would marry again."

"Are there any signs of it?"

"Absolutely none, as far as I can see. She never meets any men. She doesn't seem to know anybody but widows. I always hope every time she comes back from abroad that she may have found someone, but it's always more widows."

Elinor laughed outright at this.

"Why do you want her to marry again?" she asked.

"Well, it would be rather an excitement. And then we might be frightfully rich, and have a place in the country, and a flat in town, and a villa in Italy, and a car, or perhaps even two . . ."

"You don't want much, do you?"

"Oh, I don't really mean it any more," Evelyn laughed. "I used to. I used to lie in bed and dream of a perfectly wonderful step-father; you know, terribly attractive and thrilling, like Herbert Marshall, the actor, who'd spoil me horribly. I don't see why Mother shouldn't marry again, though. I know she loved father, but after all she isn't old, and she's quite pretty. Some of the girls at school simply rave over her photographs,

and think she's perfectly beautiful. And it would do Jack good, too, to have a man over him."

"You and Jack don't seem to be getting on too well," Elinor smiled.

"Oh, Jack's an ass, and Mother spoils him. I'll tell you something while we're about it, Elinor." She used the Christian name a shade proudly and self-consciously, having only recently been promoted to it. "Jack's frightfully jealous of *you*, because you were my discovery. He pretends to be awfully contemptuous of you, but he really admires you terribly. I know, because of the way he goes on beforehand whenever you come to dinner. 'Can't ask the So-and-so's; they're not good enough'; always tries to drag in one of his own special friends; goes and brings a whole lot of books down from his bedroom, and leaves them lying about the drawing-room, to impress you. I caught him at it, last time you came, and he was awfully angry; tried to bluff it out. As a matter of fact, I did it myself once, and felt so beastly about it afterwards that I wanted to come and confess to you, and then hadn't got the nerve, because it sounded so silly. But Jack always pooh-poohs anything I do, and pretends your work isn't really important."

"Darling, I don't think it is."

"Oh, rot. It's a jolly sight more important than the stuff his friends turn out, anyway."

"Who are they?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perfectly ghastly people. All arty, with earnest noses and vegetarian complexions. Even Mother's getting a bit worried, I think, because he slacks his law-work so. He wants to give it up and do journalism, but Mother makes him stick it, because it's father's office and what he wanted."

She chattered on through lunch. Elinor enjoyed listening to her.

"Who was that man I met the other afternoon—Mr. Benford? Is he a writer? I thought he probably was, but I went to the Public Library and looked him up in *Who's Who*, and I couldn't find him. Still, it was a pretty old edition. *Is* he an author? What does he write?"

"Novels."

"Good?"

"Amusing. I don't think you'd care for them, though."

"No, I don't think I should, either," Evelyn said, surprisingly.

"Why do you say that?" Elinor asked. "Didn't you like him?"

"Not awfully," Evelyn replied. "Oh, I suppose I shouldn't say that, as he's a friend of yours . . ."

"That's all right," Elinor assured her, quickly. "What didn't you like about him?"

"I don't know. I thought he was too . . . pleasant." Evelyn searched for a word. "Too agreeable, somehow. Oh, I expect it's all nonsense. I was probably angry at his being there, because it was the first time I'd seen you, and I wanted you to myself. I know I was wishing he'd go, the whole time. Hullo, there he is!"

"Where?" Elinor asked, startled.

Gus came across the room to their table.

"I hoped I'd catch you," he said. "I've been lunching with a man who had a train to catch. I thought I'd come and see what you were doing."

"We're going to a *matinée*," Elinor said. "Would you like to come with us?"

Gus accepted, and they went on together. After they had taken Evelyn to tea and put her on a No. 13 'bus, he returned with Elinor to her flat.

"Dining anywhere to-night?" he asked her.

"Yes, quietly with Hermione. I haven't seen her for ages. Why don't you come too?"

"Heaven forbid!" he answered. "Ring her up and say you've got a headache, and let's go out somewhere, or else just stay here, won't you?"

"I can't do that. I've been terribly remiss about her, as it is. But why don't you come with me?"

"Because I've no desire to know her."

"I see," said Elinor. "But for my sake?"

"Not even for your sake, dear. Why should I?"



What would be the fun of sitting around and listening to you two talk scandal? "

"No, I see your point," she admitted. "Well, come in after dinner then, and fetch me. I'd like to get to bed early to-night. You can bring me home."

"I'm sorry," said Gus, obstinately, "but I don't want to go to her house."

"Why not? "

"Because she's grabbing; because that wouldn't be the end of it. Then she'd ask me to dinner, and I should have to ask her back, and . . . I don't want to know all these friends of yours. Why should I? They're not the slightest use or interest to me. I think *you* waste too much time over them, but that's your look-out. Anyway, *I'm* not going to."

"No," said Elinor. "I suppose you're quite right. I think it would have been nice of you to have fetched me to-night, though."

He caught the reproach in her voice.

"Now don't start getting hurt," he said. "I like being with you, you know that; but I'm not going to waste my time on your friends. I'll meet you afterwards, anywhere you like. What about the Savoy about twelve?"

"No; I'm going to bed early. I need it."

"I see," he said, briefly. "All right, then, I'll ring you up to-morrow."

They talked of other things for a while, and then, as he rose to go, he turned back.

"Forgiven me?" he asked. "I suppose you think I'm terribly selfish not to sacrifice myself for you to-night."

"Would it be such a sacrifice? "

"Listen," he said. "Let's get this clear. I'm sure your friends are very nice people, but they're not people I want to know. I haven't the time for them. They've nothing to offer me. They're not amusing, they're not smart, they don't get you anywhere. They're not even rich—not really rich. They're just 'would-be's.' Speudo, I once heard an old lady call it."

"Well, so am I," said Elinor. "Quite speudo! "

"Oh, rot!" he answered, irritably. "I hate the way

you have of always depreciating yourself. It's silly and it's conceited—inverted conceit. Well, I'm conceited too, but it takes another form. The best of everything and the best of everybody is usually just not quite good enough for me. You say these people are your friends, this clot of women you go about with. I don't know why, I don't know what they've ever done for you. It seems to me from the little I've seen that you give them far more than they give you."

"Haven't *you* any friends?" she asked him.

"Friends? Yes, plenty."

"Old friends?"

"What do you mean?"

"What I say; old friends, people you've known all your life, whom you like for just being there, irrespective of their virtues or their vices, or what use they are to you. People with whom you don't have to calculate whether you're getting more than you're giving. Just old friends."

"Yes, of course; but I hate habits," he replied.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Who are your friends?" she asked. "What sort of people? Duchesses? Only the smart and successful?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Well, tell me. Who are they?" She was surprised to find herself getting angry. She did not quite know what it was that had angered her.

"Who? People I like, people who amuse me."

"But real friends? Have you any?"

"I don't know what you mean," he answered. "Cronies? School chums? No. I tell you, that sort of thing's not friendship; it's habit. Habit and waste of time. I've got my work, and my position to make. I go out a lot and I know a lot of charming people. If I waste time on people I don't like, it's to some purpose."

"You and Hermione ought to like each other," she retorted. "That's just the way she goes on. Her phrase is, 'One can't afford to do that kind of thing.'"

"And yet you like her?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I do. And I don't know

why, but I'm fond of her. Habit, I suppose. I've known her for years. Tell me," she went on, lightly, "what about me? How do you reconcile *our* relationship with your principles?"

"What do you mean?" he said, very angrily.

"I can't see what you're getting out of it," she replied. "I'm not rich, and I'm not smart, and I'm not important."

"You make me want to hit you," he said. "Do you think I never do anything except from expediency?"

"I don't know," she answered. "It sounds as though you didn't."

"I'd better go," he said.

"No, I apologise," she broke in, quickly. "That was beastly of me. But, my dear, do you realise that I don't really know much about you? I don't know much about your life, I don't know what it's like. I know you're . . . social, but I don't know how much it means to you. I don't know what your background is. I don't really know what you're aiming for. Not just social success? Or is it that?"

"I don't know what you mean," he said again. "I've got my life mapped out more or less as I want to make it—I suppose everybody has. And I've had to realise that there are things one just hasn't time for. That's all."

She nodded, suddenly disinclined to continue the discussion. She felt it leading where she had no wish to follow it.

"Yes," she said, simply, and then completely switched her mood. "And now, my dear, I must change. I'm appallingly late, as usual."

"Do we meet to-night?" he asked.

She hesitated for a moment only.

"Of course," she said, lightly. "I'll come down to the Savoy."

It was a capitulation, because she did not want to lose him, because although their talk had suggested huge fields of disagreement, he was still attractive to her and she wanted his company. She would have to be

careful, that was all, careful to avoid the personal note, just as she had learned to be careful in talking of his work. That subject, raised soon after their first meeting, had been carefully skirted ever since. He cared, she had found, so much more for appearance, the appearance of smart success, than for anything else; and in his work, as in his life, he had discovered what he believed to be the formula for it. There was nothing to be done about it. She accepted it, as she accepted so many things, with a shrug of her shoulders.

Her evening with Hermione was the first time they had met for several weeks, and Elinor was more than a little surprised to find that there had been a complete shifting of positions in the Norman-Betsy situation. Hermione, who, when last heard of on the subject, had been protesting her contempt for the venture, appeared now to have turned round on her resolution to have nothing to do with it, and to be fighting Betsy over the management of the scheme. She told Elinor all about it in her boudoir after a rather meagre dinner of cutlets and a savoury, to which she helped herself sparingly.

She lived in Halsey Street, Chelsea, in a little slum-like house which she was always re-decorating. Her boudoir was a tiny room of the kind that gets photographed in the illustrated papers—as indeed it had been more than once. At the present moment it was full of angles and geometry. The colour-scheme was cream, gold and lacquer red; the lights were fan-shaped, with long red tassels attached, and there were tassels on the large, octagonal mirror over the pentagonal fireplace. Elinor was itching all the evening to get up and pull them off. The curtains were red and gold and shimmering. It was all very new and curiously like one of those rooms on the stage which the audience never believes to exist in real life.

Elinor refused a chair, saying she did not know how to sit on a polyhedron, and that she would be far more comfortable on the floor. Hermione, in a gold and scarlet kimono, looked thinner than ever, and desperately ill. Her pale, colourless, faintly sandy hair, which,

*although shingled, always looked as though she were trying to let it grow, seemed to emphasise the lack of colour in her face and eyes. She had not bothered to make up or dress herself properly; it had not seemed worth while for an evening alone with Elinor. Elinor reflected how fortunate it was that she had not brought Gus with her, but how different Hermione would have been if she had.*

Hermione had now thrown herself whole-heartedly into the opera venture, for Norman's sake, to prevent his being exploited, she explained, and by now had got the whole of London society interested. The papers had been full of it. She couldn't understand how Elinor could have missed seeing them. She showed her Press cuttings, chiefly extracts from the social chatter columns, concerning the fascinating Mrs. Van Leer, who had a charming house in Chelsea, which she had herself decorated, and was interesting herself in the forthcoming musical venture in which the composer, Dr. Norman Clifford, who was, of course, her half-brother, would be concerned.

"Why do they always say 'of course'?" Elinor asked. "So that those who already know won't say, 'Yah, chestnut!' or 'Queen Anne's dead,' I suppose. Or is it to flatter those who don't know, by assuming that they do? I've often wondered."

Hermione waved this aside as irrelevant.

"I don't see Betsy's name anywhere," Elinor went on, as she looked through the cuttings. "Is she keeping in the background?"

"No, she's there, somewhere," Hermione said, vaguely. "She's been mishandling the thing terribly. Even Norman is losing patience with her, and you know how long it takes him to realise anything. I simply had to step in to prevent his being victimised."

"Well, you seem to be doing very nicely out of it," Elinor remarked.

"My dear, do you realise she was trying to do the whole thing on five thousand pounds? I've even had to collect further backing for her. She doesn't know the

*first thing about it; it's a practical joke to her. The principal trouble at the moment is the question of the settings. Betsy's got some boy she's discovered, that she's crazy about."*

"Oh! Who?"

"Some little pip-squeak, half playwright, half scene designer. Fairless, his name is. Betsy picked him up somewhere. She's mad about him."

"Oh, I'm responsible for that," said Elinor. "I told her about him, anyway."

"You did? Betsy's claiming him as a discovery. Says she found him sleeping on the Embankment or something; brought him here to lunch with me. He was abominably rude and self-opinionated."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Elinor. "What's his work like?"

"Punk," said Hermione, briefly. "But he's got round Betsy somehow. I'll see to that, though. He's not a friend of yours, is he?"

"Not in the least," Elinor replied. "I've only clapped eyes on him for one second, but I thought he looked rather down and out, and in need of a job."

"Yes, I know," said Hermione. "That's all pose, though. He thinks it's artistic to look shabby and dirty, that's all. Besides, what does Betsy know about Art, anyway?"

"What does Norman think of him?"

"Exactly the same as I do. Oh, Betsy bullied him into agreeing with her at first, but I've made him see sense. Really, my dear, the boy's useless; worse than useless, because he's obstinate. I want Ham Sotherington to do it."

"What, the Honourable Hamish? Son of the belted Earl?"

"Yes. Do you know him?" Elinor shook her head. "Oh, you must. He's the most delightful lad, and really extraordinarily gifted. Did I tell you he's taking an interest in the shop? You know his own place, 'Perugia,' that Italian furniture shop in Hans Crescent? Well, I think we're going to amalgamate. He's got the most

perfect taste, and his name would give the thing a tremendous cachet."

"Yes," said Elinor, "I can see the Fairless boy wouldn't have a chance against the aristocracy."

"Don't be bitter," said Hermione, with faint anger. "You know there's no one who's less of a snob than I am. Good Lord, look at the unknown people I've sponsored in the last four years! But I tell you this boy's no use; he's a talentless boor. Now what Ham can give us . . ."

She went off into a description of the virtues and advantages of the youthful interior decorator. It was obvious that she had set her mind on an alliance with him, and that Paul Fairless stood no chance. He seemed, indeed, to have got in wrong with Hermione; but Betsy could be obstinate when she liked, and half the money, at any rate, was coming from her. Where the rest was coming from, Elinor did not know; but she suspected that it was being supplied on Sotherington's behalf. He, notoriously, had none himself, and neither had Hermione, but she, too, could be ruthless and determined when her prestige was at stake. There was quite obviously going to be a healthy-sized battle between the half-sisters; Elinor, though regretfully, felt inclined to back Hermione, as having the greater endurance.

When Elinor had told Gus that afternoon that she was fond of Hermione, she was speaking what was, in general terms, the truth. She knew her to be an opportunist, striving and, even, malicious, but she understood, too, the circumstances which made her these things. Hermione's marriage had been a very unhappy one, and her life in Belgium lonely and miserable. When she returned to London, fifteen years after she had left it to marry Fernand Van Leer, she formed a desperate ambition to make herself noticed; her years of exile had left her bitterly jealous of everyone who was living the life which she so passionately would have liked to live—the life of the smart social world in London—and she concentrated all her energies on achieving a position in that world. It could not be done without

insincerity and ruthlessness, overriding whoever stood in her way, jealous of anyone else's success, spiteful with her tongue, toadying to people whom she disliked and despised, for the sake of what they could do for her. She had no real friends, but accounted for that by saying, "Nobody really likes anybody, these days, anyway." She was, probably, fonder of Elinor than of anyone else, and had little competition to fear from her, so that she could be nice to her without misgiving, just as she could always afford to be nice to failures. Elinor realised all this perfectly clearly; but she realised, too, the barren loneliness and yearning that drove Hermione always on, yet never made her happy, and pitied her, succeeding still in seeing in her the girl with whom she had been at school, remembering the times when she, herself, had been ill during the last few years, and Hermione's kindness and affection in looking after her. She thought of Hermione as an unhappy, rather than, as so many other people did, a false, dangerous and over-ambitious woman.

Presently they abandoned the subject of the opera scheme, and Hermione asked her, rather obviously as a matter of form and politeness, what she had been doing, and why she had not seen her, and then did not listen to the answers. She said: "How exciting!" when told of *The Rose Garden*, and remarked that Elinor was looking tired, and must be careful not to overdo it.

"What?" Elinor asked.

"Oh, everything. You rush around so. You never spare yourself. You never let down for a minute."

"Poor, dear Elinor," Elinor quoted laughingly, "always doing a hundred different things at once." She checked herself, and refrained from adding the remainder of the phrase.

"Well, it's true, isn't it?" Hermione smiled. "Your vitality's incredible, but I do think you waste it. You really can't afford to, and, after all, it never seems to get you anywhere in the end. Have you heard from Winkie?"

"Not for weeks. Where is she?"

"Oh, my dear," Hermione gave a light laugh, and



proceeded to narrate. It appeared that Winkie had staged another scene with her husband almost immediately, and had then remembered rather suddenly that she had a mother in Weston-super-Mare, gone to visit her, and taken her off to Biarritz with her. She had written to Hermione, however, a week later, saying that she really couldn't stand it, and begging her to come and join her. When Hermione had refused, she had telegraphed Nancy, and Nancy had gone, although she was a little hurt at Winkie's seeming to have forgotten that she had already asked her a couple of weeks before. Sam had been very angry that Nancy, instead of returning to England to be with Derek during his holidays, had wired for the boy to go out and join her at Biarritz, and there had been a telegraphic skirmish between the two Rossiters.

"Sam said he wouldn't have the boy at home mooching about London all alone during the holidays, with no one to look after him, and that he didn't see why he should pay his fare to Biarritz, or that it would do him any good to knock around listening to Winkie and his mother talking clothes and scandal," Hermione told her. "So Nancy's coming home to-morrow with a very bad grace. It's the first time her maternal sense has ever seemed to fail her; but I should think a holiday from Sam must have been a blessed relief. Still, I can't imagine that she wouldn't be aching to get back if Winkie's been pouring out her grievances the way she did before she left."

"Did you get it?" asked Elinor.

"Did I? She came and did it in the shop for a whole morning, never even stopping for customers, and then said I was unsympathetic because I wouldn't let her come back in the afternoon. It's nice to think of all the priceless pearls of intellectual conversation that must have been dropped at Biarritz these last few weeks, between the two of them."

She improvised a short imaginary dialogue between Nancy and Winkie, sitting in the Casino, alternating question and grievance with scandal and comments on

the clothes and reputations of the people around them. Elinor laughed. At half-past eleven she rose to go.

"Good-bye, darling," said Hermione, as she kissed her in the tiny Chinese hall. "Take care of yourself. Don't do too much, and ring me up soon. I'll 'phone you if there's any news. Why don't you come and dine one night and bring Mr. Benford with you? I'd like to meet him again, and I want you and Ham to know each other. We might make a *partie carrée*."

"That would be lovely," Elinor murmured, wondering as she did so whether she should test Gus by offering the young aristocrat as bait, and then repudiated the thought.

Gus was waiting for her at the Savoy. They had supper together, and he was very gay and charming. No mention was made of the afternoon's dispute. He took her home early because she was tired, and left her at her door, where he kissed her good-night. Inside, she found a note addressed to her in his handwriting. He must have written it earlier in the evening, and left it, or sent it round by hand, before meeting her at supper. She took it upstairs with her, and read it standing up, with her cloak half slipping from her shoulders.

"My dear" [he wrote], "what is this all about? When I left you I was angry; angry and, let me confess it, more than a little hurt. I was tempted to end all this now, to say good-bye, not bitterly, but lest this shadow, this hurt, should recur and spoil what I would keep as it has been, a relationship of happiness and laughter. But I value it too much, and am sentimental enough to believe, against the fear that this afternoon has planted in me, in the possibility of our happiness.

"I have given thought to all you said. You accused me of giving too much thought to all I do, calculating its worth as though on a sort of social profit-and-loss account. I was angered because it seemed to me, momentarily, unjust. And yet is it unjust? If one has any sense of one's own value (and surely that is no more than saying if one has any self-respect) one should at least seek to do nothing that is unworthy or belittling. These friends of yours, my dear, if I may touch the personal issue without being personal, so to

*‘speak, may have a definite value for you; if I regret them in your life it is out of appreciation for you, out of a belief that you are finer and worthy of a better setting than you will allow yourself to believe. You reject that belief in yourself, calling it conceit. I ask you to accept it under the name of self-respect. But for myself, call it conceit if you will, I will do only what I believe is good for me to do. I have wasted too much time frittered with too much trash, before now, not to know what I am talking about. My policy, as you choose to call it, is born of my experience of a youth too often misspent in believing that all was gold that glittered.*

“But if what you said about me hurt me, it was, I am willing to admit, my vanity only that was punctured. The more serious accusation was your challenge of our relationship, as though you doubted my motives in that, too. It was that which hurt me most deeply. You asked me: ‘What I was getting out of you.’ The answer is, ‘Nothing, beyond the joy that I have in you.’ I could say with Disraeli, whose love-letters I have recently been reading: ‘I do not know, or care to know, whether you are my equal or superior. I know that your society charms me.’

“Do you wish me to assure you of my admiration for you? Am I to flatter your vanity with a carefully composed catalogue of your virtues, the first deliberate love-letter I should ever have written in my life, and, therefore, in its very deliberateness, utterly worthless? The way in which this friendship of ours has sprung into being has been my joy; the way in which we have neither asked questions nor made vows nor protestations, but have trusted sufficiently in each other’s tact, each other’s sense of manners (I can find no better phrase), to know it for a fine thing and a beautiful one. Shall I let my conceit override discretion in the hope of your taking it as a compliment and repeat that I do nothing but what I feel is good for me to do? I am glad of you, and am vain enough to believe that you, too, are—or at least have been—glad of me, and I take it as as great an honour and pleasure as I can hope to merit in this world that you like me and care to have me by you and in your life.

“And because I do, too, I have written this and put from me those moments of ugliness which threatened us this afternoon. So I shall be on tap to-night as eagerly as ever, not on my knees, since I must be a credit to my tailor, even

though you would not notice, but beside you, with my arms very anxious to be around you, and my laughter very anxious to answer yours. "Gus."

The letter was written on his own rough-edged, smoke-coloured paper, carefully and without an erasure, almost as though he must have fair-copied it. She skimmed it through quickly, carelessly at first, impatient of its laboriousness and its phraseology, but the last two paragraphs touched her against her will, and she took it to bed with her, reading it again, more carefully this time. It angered her, rousing in her a dozen answers and arguments that she wanted to fling back at him. She disbelieved it, she felt that it had been written so much more to please himself than to please her, and yet, reaching the end again, with a memory of his delightfulness over supper and of his amused, tender good-night kiss on the doorstep, she found herself won back to affection for him.

She tried to survey their relationship. She liked him; she was amused by him; she found him physically desirable; but she was not in love with him. Was she so sure of that? At least, she did not love him. They had so carefully refrained from bringing love into their relationship, anxious to keep it light and unemotional. They had talked of it together, stipulating, even, that no word of love should be spoken between them. She remembered the conversation bitterly now in the face of the strange and unexpected hurt that this letter dealt her. "Love creates demands," Gus had said. "I resent its importunities." It was easy enough to say, easy enough to mean, but it was tempting Providence; "Cocking snooks at God" was how she phrased it now in her mind.

She had no desire that this should develop into a serious love-affair, all the more so as she saw now how much he would be capable of angering her, of hurting her, even, since anger or any display of temper in herself hurt her, because she knew it to be her weakness, a weakness that she struggled always to overcome.

She turned back to the letter and read the last page again, angry both that it provoked her and that it pleased her. She switched out the light, but she could not get to sleep. She wished desperately that this had not happened, that they could have remained content in the quiescent acceptance in which they had begun. She got up and took a sheet of paper, trying to draft a reply. After four or five starts she gave it up in exasperation, and telephoned him.

"I've been trying to write to you," she said, "but I find I can't."

"Perhaps you don't know what you want to say," he answered, lightly.

"Oh yes, I know, only . . ."

"Only what? Why bother to say it? Why not leave it unsaid? I think I can imagine. Why not take it as written?"

"And give you the last word?"

"Not the last, please. That wasn't what you wanted to say, was it? Would you like me to come round to you?"

"Now?"

"Why not?"

"Aren't you in bed?"

"Not yet."

"What are you doing?"

"If you must know, I'm writing up my diary."

Elinor gave a hoot of laughter.

"So like a good American doing the Grand Tour," she said.

"Shall I come round?" he queried again.

"I'd hate to ask you to."

"Naturally. Maidenly modesty forbids. I'll come, though. Don't go to sleep."

He came round. The letter was forgotten, and they resumed their relationship as before.

## VII

MEANWHILE, the days grew more and more crowded. In the first place, her play had gone into rehearsal and, with this, Elinor found her position changing. She was no longer a person of importance but apparently only a necessary nuisance. When she attended rehearsals and made suggestions, they invariably seemed the wrong ones; when she absented herself, she received frantic telephone calls bidding her come down at once and re-write something. She seemed to re-write the play every day.

Everyone in the theatre seemed to be working at cross-purposes. The producer came to Elinor and asked her to stand by him; the leading lady invited her to dinner and a cosy chat, during which she explained how difficult the leading man was to act with, and offered a number of suggestions for the improvement of her part, not for her own sake, but for the good of the play; she talked a great deal about "balance." Morris Baird took her out to dinner, told her that she was getting too friendly with the company and that that sort of thing undermined her prestige, made love to her in taxis or in his office, asked her to come to Paris with him for a week-end, and did not seem in the least surprised or disappointed when she refused. Julia Baird started taking her to parties or arranging them for her in the name of publicity; she also suggested a trip to Paris, to buy clothes; she said it was very important for Elinor to be smartly dressed. She was expected, too, to interest herself in the leading lady's frocks, but any suggestions that she offered were resented or ignored. There were also interviewers and photographers making incessant calls upon her time, and an endless series of depressed-looking actors and actresses, who bombarded her with

letters and besieged her at the stage door or over the telephone, begging for employment, long after the cast was filled.

Angie was kept busy enough now re-typing the play with all its alterations, getting desperately muddled over the different versions; coming post-haste down to the theatre, summoned by an urgent telephone call from Elinor, and then creeping around in terror of getting in the way of the rehearsal, stumbling over the footlights, and nearly falling into the orchestra pit; sitting in the dark dust-sheet-covered stalls beside Elinor, who was attending to five different people at once and always jumping up and leaving her; trying to take down letters or instructions in shorthand on her knee, with the play going on, and the producer shouting, and charwomen dusting and sweeping, and stage-carpenters hammering, commissionaires carrying on loud conversations in the bar, and the stage manager apparently going mad all over the theatre at once.

Naturally Elinor's private life suffered, though that, too, was crowded enough. Betsy and Norman and Hermione pestered her to find some time when they could talk to her and tell her all their troubles about the opera scheme and each other; Nancy had returned from Biarritz and wanted to see her and tell her all about Winkie, and how beastly Sam had been about dragging her home and refusing to let Derek come out to her; Goronwy telephoned, wanting to see her and talk about Winkie, whom he was proposing to go and visit at Biarritz; Roly's show at the gallery was imminent; and Evelyn and Gus were both making constant demands upon her time.

Richard she had not seen since the evening that he had dined with her, on which she now looked back rather as though it had marked the end of a discarded life, since it had been on the following day that she had met Gus and the Morris Bairds, both of whom were responsible for this change in her existence. She remembered him from time to time with compunction, registered a resolution to find out where he was living and

what he was doing, and then forgot it again in the rush of her life. When she thought of him it was with a mixture of affection and impotent pity. He seemed to her so completely a symbol of frustration and of waste; all the talent and the charm and the promise of his youth had gone so utterly for nothing.

She thought of him as he had been at the outbreak of the war, just a year down from Oxford, having spent that year delightedly travelling in Germany, whence he had written her a number of gay, happy letters, full of his discovery of a sort of bubbling contentment that was like the happiness one has in the finding of perfect summer weather; full of talk, too, about the things that he meant to do when he could decide what it was that he wanted to do most. He had too many talents, a sort of fatal facility with pen, pencil and piano, but he had missed success at Oxford because he lacked the dilettantism and the exhibitionist quality needed for prominence there, being outclassed by showier, sillier, more spectacular talents. He was finding happiness in tranquillity, and had come home from Munich in June of 1914 with projects of returning and settling there to work; she remembered the day that he had come to her in August of that year, with bitterness and anger in his face and voice, to tell her that he was joining up.

After that came memories of his war-letters from Gallipoli and, later, from France; his leaves, and war-time shows that they had seen together: Doris Keane in *Romance*, Lee White in *Some* and *Cheep*, Delysia in *Pell-Mell*; and the memories were mixed with her own unhappiness and Larry's death; they were almost the only times that she went out anywhere during those later years of the war—those and similar occasions with other men briefly home from France.

She remembered one evening particularly, after they had been together to a performance in English of *The Marriage of Figaro*, given by the Beecham Opera Company at Drury Lane, and he had returned with her to the dreary rooms near the British Museum, where



she had then been living. It had been in 1918, and he ~~had been due to return to France two days later. She had asked him, as they crouched over a meagre fire,~~ whether he had thought of what he meant to do when the war was over, and he had answered:

"Just be happy; just try and get back somehow to that one glorious year I had between 1913 and all this. They say it'll never be the same, that we shall never get back to it, but we've got to. *I've got to.* I say that quite selfishly. I was beginning to find out all the lovely things there were in the world—Germany, and Munich, and the Russian Ballet, and music, and painting, and people. I was beginning to get an idea of what I wanted, and then I had to give it up for no reason at all, for all this bloodiness, which I don't understand, which I never will understand. I don't want to try. I just want to get back, if I come through; that's all. I shall have money—quite a lot, as a matter of fact; I don't want to work, except to bring all that back, to start it all going again—for *me*. It's pure hedonism, I know—completely unchristian, and un-moral, and non-altruistic, but it's **exactly** what I mean. I don't want to live for other people, or think about rebuilding the world, except just for that: beautiful things, and a good time, and as much happiness as I can get out of it. That's all. At any rate, that's how I mean to begin, just deliberately and selfishly. Can you understand?"

He had come back safely from the war, unhurt save for a bullet through his chest in 1916, which had given him four months' respite in England. He had hated the war violently, but he had spoken or written of it very little. He had published a volume of verse, but, during the Soldier Poet boom, it had passed more or less unnoticed, since it dealt with the war not at all, but only with the recollections of his year, his year of discovery, freed from what he called the silly slavery of cleverness at Oxford—discovery of beauty by himself in music and books and pictures and in the cities and forests of Bavaria. He had returned and had begun the life of which he had spoken. His father had died in 1915 and

left him money; he spent it, then, on a house which he made beautiful, on travel and on the Arts.

In 1920 he met Brenda Clayton, who was poor, but somehow "in Society," and continued to meet her everywhere he went, at dinners, dances, the Opera and the Ballet. She was very beautiful and very indifferent, but she responded to his hunger for beautiful things, his fastidious voracity for them; she thought him handsome and distinguished; he was rich and, together, they might lead the kind of life that her ambition desired. She had always pictured herself as a hostess with a salon, surrounded by expense and luxury; it was that which he was offering her when he proposed marriage. He had fallen desperately in love with her, and wanted love from her in return. She told him, honestly enough, that she did not love him, that she had never loved anyone. She was aware, within herself, that if passion were to be aroused in her, it would be by someone coarse and brutal; she knew that in the depths of her being she was capable of intrigues with chauffeurs and mechanics, but she would not risk material safety for the indulgence of her passions. There was a superficial dark strength and masculinity in Richard's appearance which at first deceived and attracted her, though his hands and his eyes belied it, revealing his true gentleness. He was too suppliant and too fastidious to stir her sexually, but she found him charming and was moved to an obscure pity by his crying need of her. She married him early in 1921.

From then on their life together was all that she had hoped for herself, and all that Richard had spoken of for himself that night in 1918. They had a beautiful house; they entertained; they travelled; they heard music; they had lovely things about them. They were well-known figures in the artistic life of London.

Richard had all he had asked for then, but he had not foreseen this longing that drove all else before it, that consumed him. It was like a great thirst in the midst of material beauty, like living in some rare and lovely city in a time of siege and drought, this longing

for a completer possession of her than the mere fact of their marriage gave him, that their marriage indeed seemed only to enhance. It was not merely a sexual need, though sex became its symbol. It was a dream that racked him, a dream of completeness and sufficiency, of satisfaction for the restless hunger in him. He longed to be alone with her, to have her to himself, but when they were alone, words dried in his mouth, choking him. Her impatient, "What do you *want*, Richard?" left him without power of utterance. "If only you loved me"; it stirred her sometimes to pity, sometimes to frenzy. He could say no more than that. It tortured her as well as him. The days became blank wastes of hopelessness; it was crueller than the end of love; it was the denial of love.

He became sex-ridden. In the evenings at parties, their own or those of other people, he would find himself watching her hungrily, scarcely able to endure the hours of waiting, when the talk around him seemed an endless hell of chatter, and people began to leave and then stayed on, as though on purpose to torment him—waiting until they could be alone, with a sick prayer in his heart that to-night it might be all right, that to-night his love might break down her reserve, might make her love him in return. He would stand watching her, as she moved about the room, or stood talking with the lamp by the piano catching a glint of light in her dark hair, and would suddenly renounce his desire in anger, resolve never to approach her again, and then break that resolve the moment they were alone. Alone; and then a brief scene before a dying fire, and the clock chiming three, and Brenda's voice saying, lightly: "I think, my dear, that bed is indicated." But that meant separate beds, in separate rooms, never the long night together, never to wake and find her sleeping beside him. Not that she denied herself to him in the first years of their marriage. She gave herself generously; or, rather, she received his caresses, allowing him to love her with all the passion and the slavish humility that he felt for her, so that he would come to her room,

night after night, turn back the covers and lie beside her, holding her in his arms, discovering her body, ~~as~~ though each time afresh, with hunger and delight, his love for her lost in his desire for her, and then leave her, his passion satisfied, his longing unfulfilled, to return to his own room and throw himself upon his bed, where he would weep bitterly, self-pityingly. She had followed him once, out of compassion, and found him weeping; had seated herself beside him, stroked his hair and held him in her arms. "My dear. . . my dear. I'm sorry. Don't . . . don't cry like that . . . I'm sorry. Dick, don't!" was all that she could say, and he had pushed her from him. "Go away! Leave me alone! Please . . . please leave me!" She had stood irresolute in the doorway, her eyes large with pity, and then had gone. The next night he had come to her again, to beg forgiveness, to promise her that it should be all right, that he had control of himself now and would make no more demands of her. He had meant to say just that and then no more; to kiss her, and to leave her gently to sleep; but his desire had overcome him, and the scene had been repeated, then and many times.

But all of that had been in the first years; later, he had grown accustomed to it, their life together a sort of bright metallic blankness, and he with a dull, perpetual ache in his heart, bitter and brooding, breaking down only now and then when his physical need grew too strong for repression. Recently, she had taken a lover, an actor, with broad shoulders and large, ugly hands, handsome, a little gross and faintly common. Richard had known of it and had told no one, had not even spoken of his discovery to her; he had merely absented himself from her entirely, save when there were other people present. For ten months they had lived like that, politely, strangely, while he drank and grew ill-tempered and morose, until one night he returned to her, forcing himself into bed beside her, taking possession of her as though in hatred, and then suddenly breaking down again into maudlin, humiliating tears, and had come

to her next morning, in self-disgust, to make an end of it, to leave her; and she, although she could not see why they should not continue as they had been doing, consented.

That was how they had achieved their present position after eight years, during which all his dreams had come to nothing, and he had done nothing save write a little verse and a little music that was pleasant and correct and wholly unimportant. Waste, utter waste, and complete frustration; years of parties and strangers that they called their friends, of music and people and rich, idle, delicate living, and of longing that mocked the food it fed on.

Elinor knew more of this than anyone; she had had Richard's confidence. But, of late, Brenda, too, had grown talkative; angered at the sight of him letting himself go, making scenes at parties, behaving with a boorish rudeness and ill-temper, she, too, had started to tell, to reveal the secrets of their married life, with a sort of cold, indifferent, shrugging malice, to her women friends, who included Cynthia and Hermione, and the story had got about. It had come back to Elinor, who had refused to discuss it, and then, in championing Dick, outraged with Brenda's talking, had found herself doing so. She reproached herself now for having allowed so long to go by without seeing him. She sat down and wrote him a note to his old address, asking him to telephone her. Brenda would know at least where to forward his letters, she supposed.

But before she had time to receive an answer, she saw him on a Saturday afternoon at the Queen's Hall, where she had gone with Gus to a recital by a German Lieder soprano. She had taken the afternoon off, as a relaxation, deliberately cutting her rehearsal; she was fretted and nervy and impatient, looking for a sedative, which she hoped the concert might supply. She was not musical, but, like so many non-musical people, she responded keenly to certain musical experiences, drawing from them a human and emotional, rather than an æsthetic enjoyment.

This afternoon the hall was crowded. She and Gus sat in the front row of the Grand Circle, rather to one side. They arrived just as the singer came upon the platform, so that Elinor had no time to look around her until the end of the first group of songs. She gave herself up immediately to listening, yielding whole-heartedly to the mood of unemotional, contented acceptance induced by the sure, balanced phrasing of the singer, and the clear loveliness of her voice. At the end of the first group came *Der Nussbaum*. Elinor's hand went out and found Gus's. She leaned back, her shoulder against his, with a little sigh of ecstasy, as the gentle comfort of the song washed placidly over her, almost as though its beauty and tranquillity were emanating from her own heart. She made soft noises of contentment as the song ended, and did not join in the applause.

"I suppose one ought to clap," she said, "if only to let her know that one liked it; but if you can sing like that I should have thought you could take it for granted. Oh, I want singing like that in private. I want to be able to lie down, and wallow and wriggle, and make all the noises that I want. There aren't words for what one feels about that kind of thing; just sounds."

She released her hand and began to look around her. It was then that she caught sight of Richard, sitting right in the centre of the Grand Circle, about three rows from the front. There was a girl beside him, and they were talking. He did not see her. The girl was young and, as far as she could see, extremely pretty. She had taken off her hat, and had prettily shingled, reddish dark hair, a white skin of the kind that freckles easily, and a very short nose, like a baby's. She was simply and rather serviceably dressed; one had the impression that she had come from work. Elinor looked at her with interest; she had never before seen Richard with a woman other than Brenda; and then, to her surprise, looking down at the stalls below her, she saw Brenda, tall and very beautiful, sitting beside a dark, pallid, large-eyed young man of the type that has little interest in women except as works of art. From where

Richard sat he would not be able to see her, which was a good thing.

The singer returned. For her second group she sang the *Frauen Liebe and Leben* of Schumann, straight through without a break.

"The woman's a bloody masochist," Gus whispered to her at the end of *Er der herrlichste von allen*.

Elinor laughed, but put her finger to her lips. The next song, however, certainly bore out the diagnosis with the humility of *Ich kann's nicht fassen, nicht glauben*.

"Just a little inferiority complex in song," she whispered back when it was over. The singer led her away again to pure blissful appreciation with the next two songs, but the mawkishness of the sentiments broke through once more in the Victorian coyness with which the protagonist breaks to her husband the news of the expected baby. Elinor felt Gus's arm quiver with a suppressed giggle, and turned her gaze away so that she might not catch his eye. She let it travel round the circle and rest for a moment on Richard and his companion.

He was leaning forward, staring straight before him at the platform, his elbows on his knees and his chin supported by his hands, but the girl's eyes were fixed on him, aware that his attention was away from her, and in her face was an expression that was directly the mood of what was being sung. *Er der herrlichste von allen* might have been written there. It was so obvious that Elinor averted her eyes; there was a shock, an embarrassment, in seeing anything so nakedly and yet so utterly unconsciously displayed. She was watching Richard in profile, lovingly, greedily studying the lines of his features. It occurred to Elinor, as she looked away and then down at Brenda below, that that was exactly how Richard must always have looked at his wife, staring hungrily at the profile she turned to him, while her eyes were fixed ahead of her, as his were now. She glanced back at them; the look had gone, the girl was studying her programme, but it had been unmistakable, the look of someone deeply, drowningly in love.

There was no appreciable interval between the groups of the songs, and the audience, for the most part, did not leave their seats. She tried to attract Richard's attention, and at last succeeded in doing so, through the girl, who apparently noticed her staring at him and nudged Richard, who grinned and waved, and made signs to meet them outside afterwards.

"Who's that?" Gus asked.

"Dick Gilchrist. I'd like you to know him," she said, and then stopped, remembering his disinclination to be bothered with her friends.

"What did all those gestures mean?"

"Meet him afterwards, I suppose."

Gus looked at his watch.

"Are you doing anything?" she asked.

"I've got an appointment at five."

She said nothing, but turned back to her programme. Though he had spoken perfectly simply and matter-of-factly, the same note of warning and resentment seemed to have crept into the atmosphere that had been there the afternoon of their quarrel. Somehow her mood of contentment was broken by a vague irritation, and was not recaptured until, at the very end of the concert, Strauss' *Traum durch die Dämmerung* lulled her back to quietude, with its suggestion of warm, grey-blue summer evenings in the fields, the world bathed in tranquillity, sweet-smelling, with lovers at peace. When it ended, she held her breath for a moment, and then broke into sustained applause because she wanted to hear it again—applause in which the rest of the audience joined, so that the singer repeated the song and, with it, magically, all of its effect.

"Durch Dämmergrau in der Liebe Land,  
Ich gehe nicht schnell, ich eile nicht . . ."

This time it was Gus who sought her hand, and she let it lie in his, closing her eyes. For a moment she thought that she loved him.

In the foyer afterwards they found Richard and the girl, whom he introduced as Miss Morrison. She was



even prettier, seen close to, than from a distance, though her eyes were set too far apart for beauty, but they were very blue, and her mouth was soft and rather like a flower. The four of them stood talking for a few moments, while the crowd pushed past them.

"I tried to telephone you this morning," said Richard. "I got your note. When can we meet?"

"Soon, please," said Elinor, and then, as she spoke, she saw Brenda approaching, and tried to get between her and Richard. But he had already seen her. She heard a tiny, quick intake of his breath. He stood staring at her, standing quite still, as though waiting for her to come up to them, making no attempt to move or look away. As she passed them she looked at him, and then smiled and said:

"Hello, Dick! Nice, wasn't it? I thought you'd be here." Then she saw Elinor. "Hello!" She smiled. "You? I've been reading about you in the papers. My congratulations. How can I come to your first night?"

"I can't believe there's going to be one," Elinor answered, "the way things are going."

"I'm sure it'll be a huge success," Brenda said, lightly. "Best wishes, anyway." She turned back to Richard. "You're looking well, Dick," she added, smiled and moved on.

Richard stood staring after her. Elinor cast a glance at him and was frightened by what she saw in his face, which had gone a strange colour, like clay. A tiny nerve at the corner of his mouth was twitching. He looked back at her vaguely, as though he had forgotten her.

"Where are we going?" he asked, dully. "Why don't you come and have tea with us? We can go across to the Langham."

"I must be going," said Gus. "I've got to get to the other end of London."

"Why don't you come back with me?" Elinor asked. "The Langham's always full of clergymen and dowagers. Won't you?"

She turned to the girl, who seemed slightly embarrassed, but Richard answered for her.

"Thanks, we'd love to," he said quickly.

"Can we drop you, Gus? I suppose the other end of London means Chelsea?"

"I want to go home first," he answered. "I'll leave you. Good-bye."

He shook hands with Richard, bowed, smiled and departed. They pushed forward to the steps, and Elinor saw Brenda in her car, with the large-eyed young man beside her, driving away. They found a taxi opposite the Polytechnic. Richard sat on the *strapontin*; the girl beside Elinor.

"Did you enjoy the concert?" Elinor asked her, for the sake of making conversation.

"Yes, very much. She's got a lovely voice. There were some maddening people behind us, though, who would insist on explaining the songs to each other all the time."

She spoke simply, yet with a kind of false assurance, as though she were anxious, just a shade too anxious, to show herself at ease. Richard was staring out of the window. Elinor was groping for some key to the situation. She wished she knew who this girl was, how much she knew about Richard, whether she had seen Brenda, or had realised what Richard's seeing her had meant to him. She began to talk, rapidly and a lot, gaily, sillily, about the concert and singing generally, about her father, and other famous singers she had known or heard, throwing out anecdotes with an even more than usually rattling fluency that was designed merely to prevent there being a silence, since she felt that once she stopped talking, none of them would be able to begin again. The girl smiled, nodded, trying to look friendly and interested, although it was obvious that most of the names Elinor was mentioning meant nothing to her. While she talked from the front of her mind outwards, Elinor tried to place the girl, neat and pretty, sitting rather upright, not leaning back, her gloved hands resting in her lap. She was obviously a little uncomfortable, yet her shyness was not a gawkiness, not a

schoolgirl awkwardness, but a sort of faint social embarrassment that was masking itself in a mixture of correctness and friendliness. Elinor had a sense of class-consciousness on the girl's part, as though she were unused to sudden, intimate meetings with strangers like this, unused to being treated on a level, picked up, accepted, swept into a conversation and a kind of life to which it was tacitly assumed that she belonged. She wondered for a moment if she were a shopgirl, but she did not look that type; Richard's secretary, perhaps, only she did not know that he had one.

They reached the Mews.

"Would you like to come to my room?" Elinor asked. The girl followed her into the bedroom, and then Elinor went to the kitchen.

When she returned, Richard and the girl were standing by the book-shelves. She had a volume in her hand and he was looking over her shoulder.

"What have you got there?" Elinor asked.

The girl started slightly.

"It's one of your books, *The Inner Circle*," she said, and then hesitated. "Does one tell authors if one likes their work?"

"One does," Elinor laughed. "One only doesn't, if one doesn't . . . if you know what I mean."

"Well, then, I do," said the girl, again with a kind of frankness that did not seem natural to her, but faintly defiant. "Very much. Especially *The Rose Garden*, though I should think you must be tired of hearing that. Are you working on anything now?" she added.

Elinor caught the faintly professional note in the phrase. The ordinary girl would have said: "Are you writing a new one?"

"I'm afraid it's lapsed, rather," she said. "I haven't written a word for about two months. I can hear the heroine kicking in my mind, screaming to be taken notice of." She turned back to Richard. "What have you been doing, Dick?"

"I've got a job," he answered. "Reader to Oliphant's."

"Good Lord! Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something to do. Oliphant suggested that I might. I read six bad novels a week. Keeps me out of mischief. It really is incredible to think of the labour that's going on all round us that never comes to anything. All the people sitting up, night after night, writing stuff that's no good for anything but the waste-paper basket. I don't know how they've got the determination. You pick up a manuscript that's been somebody's constant job for eighteen months, taken up all their spare time and probably been their one hope of salvation and ambition and success, and you throw it aside in a couple of hours as useless."

"A couple of hours is generous," said the girl. "Most readers aren't so conscientious."

Elinor turned to her.

"Are you in it, too?" she asked.

"Me? No. I'm just in the office, that's all."

"Oliphant's secretary?"

"Not even that. Nothing so important. I'm just one of the 'young ladies in the office'; that's what old Mr. Oliphant calls us." She gave a glance at Richard, who smiled, as though at a shared joke. "But I type the reports sometimes, and I hear the readers talking. Oliphant's published you for a time, didn't they?"

"Yes. It was old Oliphant who got *The Rose Garden* accepted. He was with Billington's then. I remember walking up and down outside the office while I was waiting to hear from them, staring at the windows, and wondering if somebody inside was reading my book, whether my fate mightn't be being decided just at that very moment."

"Oh, poor thing!" said the girl, laughing and melting suddenly.

"Do *you* write, yourself?"

She shook her head.

"I couldn't," she said. "And even if I did, I'd never show it to anyone."

"Why not?"

"I'd never have the pluck. I think it takes an awful

lot of courage to hand round something you've written. Conceit, too, in a way."

"It's a kind of conceit there's an awful lot of in the world," Elinor laughed.

Mrs. Moggridge brought the tea and they settled down to it. *The girl seemed slightly aware of her manners. Her little finger did not exactly curl when she drank,* but Elinor felt she was preventing it from doing so because she had first learned that it should, and then that it shouldn't. There was a constraint about her.

Presently the telephone rang. "I was just wondering about that," laughed Richard. "There seemed an unusual peace about the place."

Elinor answered it. It was Morris Baird, in a foul temper.

"Where the hell have you been all afternoon?" he shouted. "Why can't you say when you're not coming down to rehearsal? Here have I been trying to get in touch with you ever since noon. What d'you think we're doing here, anyway? Holding a tea-party?"

"What's the matter?" asked Elinor.

"Matter? Your damned second-act curtain. Will you come right down and re-write it?"

"Now?"

"Yeah, now! And stick around to-night, too, will you? You can't go quitting on the job like this."

"All right," said Elinor. "I'll come." She turned back to the others.

"The man who said plays weren't written, they were re-written, was just about right," she said. "My God, what would one think of a publisher who treated one like that? I've got to go."

"So have I," said the girl. "I'm late, as it is."

"Won't you have dinner with me?" Richard asked her.

"I can't," she said definitely. "I must get home. There'll probably be a fuss, as it is."

"Where do you live?" Elinor asked her, as they put on their hats in the bedroom.

"Wembley Park. Out in the subbubs. It takes me hours to get home."

"How do you go?"

"From here? Where are we? South Kensington, aren't we? Inner Circle to Baker Street, and then the Met. I do envy you having a place like this."

"Do you like it?"

"Yes. It's . . . fun. I like your books. I could spend hours with them."

"Do you live at home?"

"Yes."

"With your parents?" She was deliberately manufacturing talk. The girl was not making it easy for her. She was holding back, Elinor could see, not so much from shyness, as from some sense of etiquette or formality on a first meeting. She nodded, by way of answer to this, and then, as though she feared that that was rude, said, "Yes" as well, and then stood waiting, drawing on her gloves and not looking at her, while Elinor made up her mouth. She made Elinor feel awkward—a rare experience for her. She seemed so anxious to be self-effacing and yet not inferior. She was in no way common, nor yet that worse thing, "genteel," she was merely being friendly, but guarded, as though she did not think it correct to approach anything like intimacy, and yet was anxious to show herself at ease, to assert that she was not socially embarrassed. Elinor liked her instinctively for her looks and her smile, but could make no headway with her. It was a relief when they rejoined Richard in the sitting-room, where he was standing staring into the fire.

"Where are you going, Dick?" she asked him.

"Nowhere. Home, I suppose."

"Where's that?"

"Darcy Street, off Marylebone Road."

"So? Flat?"

"Sort of. Furnished rooms, really."

"Nice?"

"Bit squalid. Ornery. All right, though."

"Are you going back there now?" She eyed him.

"Yes. Why?"

"Take me down to the theatre. Help me to cope with Morris Baird. Will you?"

"I'd love to," he answered, eagerly. He guessed why she had asked him, so that he should not be alone, and gratitude came into his face like a light. "Bless you, Elinor," he said, and hugged her impulsively. The girl lowered her eyes.

"Come along. Good-night, Mrs. Moggridge." Elinor swept them out of the flat. They left the girl at South Kensington station, where she bade them good-night and hurried down the stairs to her train. Elinor and Richard took a taxi.

Morris Baird apologised for his rudeness when she arrived.

"Sorry for bawling you out like that," he said, briefly, "but that Barringer bitch has been throwing temperament all afternoon till she's got me so's I don't know whether I'm coming or going! Not accustomed to this: not accustomed to that. Say, who does she think she is? The Voigin Mary? Not on your sweet life! Jesus, these English stars! Well, I tell you, one more sound from her and she's out on the sidewalk where she belongs, and where I'd have had her weeks ago if I'd listened to my own advice. And all because the stage manager wouldn't O.K. a bill for seventy guineas for slippers. Seventy guineas! Three hundred and seventy dollars. For slippers! Can you beat it?"

Elinor laughed. The "Barringer bitch" was Eileen Barringer, London's most ingenuous leading lady, whose photographs, with downcast eyes, hands crossed modestly to hide what were apparently bare breasts, were already hanging outside the theatre.

Morris Baird explained the change he wanted made in the second-act curtain, and left her alone with Richard to write it. Before he went he pointed out a bottle of whisky and a siphon in a cupboard. Elinor pulled off her hat, lit a cigarette, told Richard to pour her out a drink, and settled down, scratching her head, to write. Fifteen minutes later Morris Baird returned.

"How are you getting on?" he asked.

Elinor wrote three final lines, scrawled "Curtain" underneath, and pushed the paper over to him. He read it through.

"Attagirl," he said. "Let's go down and try it."

They tried it, four or five times. Eileen Barringer was enraptured.

"Oh, that's so much better," she cried. "So much better. I *feel* it that way. I couldn't feel it the other way, a bit. Oh, I do think it's clever of you, Miss Johnson, to come down and just write it like that. We've been at our wits' end all the afternoon, haven't we, Morris darling?"

"Sure." Morris Baird slapped her shoulders. "Well, I guess we might break off there. Come and have some dinner, Elinor. Bring your boy friend along."

He took them to the Savoy Grill and gave them an elaborate meal, talking with blasphemous geniality and scandalous anecdote throughout. After dinner he said:

"I guess we needn't go back to-night. What about looking in at a show somewhere? Let's go over to the Gaiety."

They had a box at the Gaiety. Richard had cheered up a little, and sat in a kind of dazed amusement through the evening. After the show Morris Baird wanted to go on to supper somewhere, but Elinor protested weariness. He left them reluctantly, saying: "Glad to have met you. See you again," to Richard. They went back to the Mews.

"What a marvel!" Richard exclaimed. "I didn't know they really were like that."

"Nor did I," said Elinor. "I've really developed quite a deep affection for Morris. I know he's a foul-mouthed, blasphemous old devil, and I suspect him of being a thorough wrong 'un, but he makes me laugh, and he's generosity itself. He sent me three bottles of '42 brandy and a whole case of champagne last week, for no reason at all. Just good-nature, because I'd had some of the brandy in his office and said I liked it. Care for some now?"



"I would," Richard answered, and got it out of the cupboard.

"Who was the girl this afternoon?" Elinor asked idly, as she threw herself on to the sofa, and took her glass from him.

"Miss Morrison? Typist at the office. What did you think of her?"

"Difficult," said Elinor briefly, and waited.

"Yes, I know what you mean," he answered. "She's shy," and then stopped, too. "How did you think Brenda was looking?"

"Quite lovely. Who was the youth she was with? Do you know?"

"I forget his name. He used to come to our parties. He's a gossip-writer, or an interior decorator or something; useful as an escort and quite safe as far as Brenda is concerned; good for show."

"Yes." She reflected, and then asked, quietly: "Is there anyone who's not?"

"I don't know . . . now," he answered. "There was, last year. Stanley Falkner, the actor. You didn't know that, did you? Nobody did. She was damned careful; hid it beautifully. They used to lunch together at a little restaurant near Baker Street, and then go back to his rooms."

"How do you know?"

"I saw them. The thousandth chance. I'd been to Madame Tussaud's one morning, of all queer places. Pure accident, but I suddenly thought I wanted to have a look at it. I saw them as I was coming out . . . and followed them . . ."

"Richard!"

"Yes, I know. It was foul of me. I felt foul. Have you ever seen him? Looks like a coal-heaver—great hulking brute. I didn't know that side of Brenda. Funny, isn't it, how you can go for eight years, and not? I've never told anyone before."

"No." There was something hidden behind her voice.

"You didn't know, did you?" he asked, quickly.

"Me?"

"Yes. Did you know?"

"I'd heard talk," she admitted.

"Talk? Do you mean it got around? My God!" He felt suddenly sick at the thought of Brenda being discussed. "How bloody! I never knew. I thought no one knew. Talk! God, how I hate people! Talk!"

"Has it been easier, being apart?" she asked him, to draw him from his thoughts.

"Yes, I think it has . . . until to-day. I'm grateful to you for having us back here. I couldn't have managed tea alone with the Morrison child. I'm sorry it was difficult for you. I wasn't much help, I know, and *she* felt awkward."

"Yes, I don't know why. I'm not so frightening, am I? I did my best, but she didn't seem to respond. What was it?"

"Oh, just . . . shyness . . . a sort of social inferiority complex, because she's a typist and comes from the suburbs."

"Yes, she rubbed that in."

"I know. She does. Either by talking about it, or implying it. It's annoying. It happened once before when we were out together and met someone I knew."

"Tell me about her."

"There's not much to tell."

"You've been taking her out a lot?"

"No . . . once or twice, that's all. Why?" He looked at her, opened his eyes very wide and then suddenly laughed. "You don't imagine . . . ?" he began.

"What?"

"Well, that . . . that there's anything between us, to use the good old phrase?"

"Is there not?"

"My dear!" he protested, still laughing. "Do you imagine I've seduced her?"

"I hadn't thought, Dick. My mind doesn't work like that. I can see she's in love with you."

"What?" This came out in amazement.

"Didn't you know?"

"Know? Know what?"

"That she's in love with you." She sat up, suddenly alert.

"What do you mean?"

"What do *I* mean? What do *you* mean?" She was genuinely bewildered. She had assumed that they were on some relationship of lovers, but Richard's expression was one of sheer astonishment. "Dick, what is it all about, then?"

"About? Nothing. I've taken her out once or twice, that's all. Why do you imagine . . .?"

"You're not in love with her, then?"

"My dear . . ."

"I tell you, she is with you."

"What nonsense."

"It's true, Richard. I saw it this afternoon, during the concert, as clearly as if she'd shouted it at me."

"You're joking!"

"I'm not. Haven't you *made* love to her?"

"No. I tell you I hardly know her. We've been out two or three times. I think this afternoon was the third. We've had lunch together once or twice when I've been down to the office. That's how it started . . . oh, about three weeks ago. She's always insisted on paying for her own . . . we had quite a row about it. We've been to the theatre a couple of times. . . . I don't know . . . I thought she was nice and friendly. . . . I've been pretty lonely . . . I didn't think . . . but now you say . . .?"

She nodded, without speaking.

"Oh, but that's not possible," he went on, and then stopped, trying to look back over the relationship.

"Does she know you're married?"

"I don't know. I haven't told her, if that's what you mean." He was beginning to feel panic-stricken. "You don't think . . ." He couldn't finish that sentence; "That she thinks I want to marry her," was what he had been going to say. "What makes you ask that?" he asked, instead. "Why are you so sure?"

"I saw her looking at you. Oh, that sounds silly, I

## A WOMAN ON HER WAY

suppose, but it's true. I hoped perhaps you were in love with her."

"I like her," he said, slowly. "She's different alone, without all that sort of defence of manners and politeness that she has with strangers. She's nice and rather sweet . . . it's been nice having someone to take out, someone who enjoyed it, who didn't mind showing me she was having a good time. I just didn't think. . . . I've *done* nothing. I've never kissed her. At least . . ." he paused suddenly at a thought.

"What?"

"Well . . . the other night I kissed her hair." This came out like a child's confession. "It was just as we were leaving the office. I didn't think," he repeated. "I've held her hand. I . . . oh, don't! Don't make me go on!"

She said nothing, but leaned back against the cushions again.

"It can't be true!" he cried. "God knows I wouldn't want it. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. I can't love *her*. Oh, I suppose I shouldn't have started taking her out . . . I think I knew that, subconsciously, but . . . I don't want to make excuses for myself or get maudlin, but . . . as I say, I've been lonely, and she was someone to be with. She's pretty. She doesn't get much fun, apparently. I gather that she hates her home, though she doesn't talk much about it—a sort of ashamed loyalty. She likes books and music and the theatre. She likes going out. It was fun taking her. . . . I suppose I knew I was being a bit of a fairy prince, that way. I suppose it flattered me. But this . . . what am I to do? Stop seeing her?"

"You can't . . . suddenly . . . like that."

"What then? Cool off, by degrees? My God, how bloody! Tell her? What can I say? 'Look here, you mustn't be in love with me, because I'm married, and it's no go'? You know I can't."

"No, not that," she said, a shade impatiently.

"But . . ."

"What?"

"You've got to tell her how you stand. It may be cruel, but it's only fair."

"I suppose it is." He rose and leaned against the mantelpiece. "Elinor, you're sure?" he asked desperately.

"Yes. I think so."

"God! What a mess! If I'd only thought! Have I been a *bloody* fool? Do you blame me terribly?"

"Blame? No." She shook her head, definitely.

"If I were that kind, I suppose I'd seduce her," he said, contemplatively. "I wish I were. I'd like to . . . in a way. Only, I've got a conscience. Too damned much. I can't do that. It's got to stop, I can see that, but . . ."

He ceased talking and stood staring down into the remains of the fire for a moment. Then he began to walk up and down, biting his lips and frowning. Elinor lay watching him, one arm behind her head, the other, with her hand holding her empty glass, dangling to the floor. The room was in half-darkness, and very still. He stopped suddenly, leaning with his back against her desk, and stood facing her, his hands grasping the wood on either side of him.

"I must talk to her . . . somehow," he said at length. "Tell her about Brenda, anyway. I don't know what I'll say. I'd much rather let it ride, just slip from under, but I can't do that. It wouldn't be fair. We're going out on Thursday. We were going to the Chekhov play. If I make it just dinner instead . . ." He paused, envisioning the conversation. "I said I'd take her to your first night. That's how I've gone on, just impulsively . . . never thinking of *her*, except to spoil her, pet her, because it was nice to find someone I *could* spoil. And now . . . you make me feel as if I'd 'had' her, taken advantage of her, just to amuse myself. It's horrible."

"I wouldn't have said anything," Elinor sat up again, hugging her knees, "only I took it for granted, somehow, that there was something going on."

"I'm glad you did . . . if you're right. God knows how you know, but I'll trust your instinct. It can't be

so very bad, though, in only four weeks. I'd better go. It's late and you must be tired." He came over to her. "Don't get up."

She jumped up, straightening her clothes.

"Don't worry too much," she said. "And don't hate me for butting in. God knows I wish you *could* find something. I hoped this might be it, only it didn't look like it. That's why I spoke. It wasn't curiosity."

"As if I didn't know that! Good-night, my dear."

"Good-night, Dick. Let me see you soon."

He embraced her affectionately, and went.

It was early April, and a cool night, with a moon behind large, torn, windy veils of cloud that raced across it. There were patches on the pavement from rain that had fallen earlier in the evening, half-dried now by wind. It was past one o'clock, and the streets were dead. He began to walk, his disturbance churning in his brain. A sick sense of scared, impotent responsibility descended upon him, almost as though he had unwittingly got the girl with child. Yet when he tried to turn his mind to the situation it eluded him; it seemed to keep pace with him as he walked, but always one step behind. It seemed to have little reality; before it was always the thought of Brenda, risen startlingly new from their meeting that afternoon, the first time he had seen her since their parting. He saw her going home with the large-eyed young man, giving him tea, bidding him good-bye, going upstairs to dress for some engagement of which he knew nothing. All of his own evening vanished, dispersed into unreality: the theatre, Morris Baird, dinner and the show, even his talk with Elinor. The girl did not exist. He went over and over in his mind the details of that brief meeting with Brenda in the foyer of the Queen's Hall; standing watching her approach, his eyes fixed on her face as she talked to the young man at her side or to people she knew in the throng; her smile to him, kind, friendly enough, unresenting; her words, cool and smooth like washed pebbles: "Hullo, Dick! Nice, wasn't it? I thought you'd be here." He said them to himself over and over again:

"I thought you'd be here. I thought you'd be here. I *thought you'd be here. Hullo, Dick! Nice, wasn't it? I thought you'd be here.*" He ceased to think, only continued to repeat them.

He walked all the way home.

## VIII

THE following morning Gus surprised Elinor by telephoning and asking her to come to a small dinner-party that he was giving at the end of the week. It was the first time that he had admitted her to his personal life or invited her to meet his friends.

"We shall only be eight," he said. "I'd like to have you there."

She dressed carefully for the party and was looking her best, her hair newly waved and glossy. She had bought a new evening-dress, intending to keep it for the first night of her play, but it arrived on the afternoon of the dinner, and she decided to wear it that night. Gus came to the Mews to fetch her, again to her surprise, since it was altogether out of his way. He looked at her approvingly as, fully dressed, she opened the door to him.

"You're looking nice," he said. "You must always wear green. That's a beautiful dress."

Elinor gave a sort of inward jeer of "Yah, I told you so" to that part of herself which had almost fallen for a flamboyant gown of flame and orange, but had allowed itself to be persuaded by the dressmaker.

The dinner was at a small restaurant in St. James's, smart, discreet, and very luxurious. It was beautifully served; the food and wine were perfect. Gus, a trifle over-tailored in a dress-suit of very dark blue, gold and crystal buttons to his white waistcoat, and a gardenia in his buttonhole, was an excellent host. There were six other guests: a celebrated portrait painter, tall, distinguished, and faintly scented, with thick grey hair that looked as if it were powdered; a pallid, hollow-cheeked, black-haired young Russian prince, with a startlingly beautiful American wife; an elderly statesman, a very



great man, accompanied by his considerably younger wife, a well-known patroness of music; and Lady Sybil Trask, the only daughter of an old Edwardian peer. She arrived late, with faint, murmured apologies: a woman of thirty-five, cool, small, slender and exquisite, like a tulip in ivory. She was dressed in white, with a single rope of pearls; she had clear, very blue eyes and pale, gold shingled hair that swept in a straight wave back from her forehead. Elinor knew her face and her doings well from the illustrated papers; she was unmarried, very active socially, interested in art, and the authoress of two poor novels. She was obviously the star-guest of the party.

Elinor wondered a good deal, as she took her place between the Russian prince and the statesman, why she herself had been invited. This was so patently one of Gus's smart parties. She had known the statesman some years before, and he greeted her now with extreme cordiality, expressing his pleasure at seeing her again, and reviving memories of house-parties where they had been fellow-guests, but Gus seemed surprised by this; surprised and, although pleased, somehow a little nettled, as though she had tricked him, keeping up her sleeve the fact that she knew people like this. But he smiled at her across the table, and, during the meal, talked both to her and of her with a kind of flattery and deference, "featuring" her now in public as he had been wont to do in private, until he made her feel that it was she who was the star-guest present. He talked a great deal about her forthcoming play, and pressed her to talk about it herself. Lady Sybil Trask was extremely interested. She talked a lot to Elinor across the table and, when coffee was being served, she turned to the Russian prince.

"Boris," she said, "change places with me, will you? I want to talk to Miss Johnson."

The change was effected, and Gus smiled on it as though in benediction.

"I've wanted to meet you so much," she began, as she sat beside her. "I'm so terribly glad Gus asked you to-night. I begged him to. I've wanted to talk to you

for ages about your books, and, if I dare refer to them in the same breath, about my own miserable efforts. I'm so terribly interested in literature. I know my own stuff's trifling, but I *am* trying to get somewhere, to express something. That's why I always want to talk to other authors, to get their point of view, to find out if we're working for the same thing, if we see life in the same way. Gus is different; his work's stylised, artificial. Charming, of course, but artificial. What I'm trying for is to *translate* life, to shape it. . . ."

She poured on in this vein, talking a great deal about expressing oneself and getting into harmony with life. "'Strewth,'" Elinor murmured to herself, feeling a little dazed.

Meanwhile, the waiters were taking up a small square of carpet to clear a space of parquet flooring. Presently the statesman interrupted Lady Sybil's monologue by asking Elinor to dance. He danced with great care and very seriously, telling her that he had a lesson every week. When they returned to the table Gus had moved beside Lady Sybil, and rose to give Elinor his seat. The music started again, and he led her to the floor.

"Nice party, Gus," Elinor commented.

"Enjoying it?" he smiled.

"Yes. What a pity Lady Sybil's so keen on 'life and letters.' She seems such a nice woman, otherwise."

She did not see him frown, but she felt a momentary rigidity of his body. Had she said the wrong thing?

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Shouldn't I? I'm sorry. But have you read her books?"

"Yes."

"Well, then . . ."

"Well, then, what? What's the matter with them?"

She gasped. It was incredible that he should like them.

"I know she's a friend of yours," she said tentatively, "but surely that doesn't blind you . . ."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said briefly.

She gave up in bewilderment. It was obvious that for some reason Gus was not going to admit that there could be anything not perfect about his distinguished guest. Why, she did not know. Snobbery again, or what? They danced in silence for a while.

"*You're too ready to criticise,*" he said, suddenly. "Just because she has a title and hasn't *got* to write for a living, all you professional women novelists think you can sneer at her as a pretentious amateur."

She made no answer to this. The sheer injustice of it took her breath away, left her defenceless. It was a stupendous piece of arrogance. Indignation boiled inside her.

"Don't be angry," Gus said, suddenly, holding her closer to him. "That was silly of me. I'm sorry. Only I'm so sick of the professional versus amateur attitude. She gets so much of it. Her name's been of the greatest disadvantage to her; it seems to prevent her ever being taken seriously. She was so anxious to meet you. She admires you so much."

"Flattery's no good," she said, irritably.

"I wasn't flattering. It's true. Didn't she tell you so herself?"

"Yes. She said she'd asked you to invite me to-night. I wondered what I was doing in this *galère*."

"Oh, for God's sake!" he muttered, very angrily.

This time it was her turn to repent.

"Sorry," she said, quickly.

"Elinor, why must you behave like this? Why all these spikes all over you?"

"I'm not used to such distinguished company, moving above my station," she laughed; but there was bitterness behind the laugh, and he caught it.

"Still harping?" he asked. "Still got the wrist-watch complex?"

"It's you," she began, fiercely, and then suddenly started to laugh. It was all so silly. "Oh, Gus, what fools we are!" she cried, and pressed herself against him. His arm tightened round her. They looked into each other's faces and smiled.

Presently she danced with the Russian prince, and then with the statesman again. Lady Sybil refused to dance. She sat smoking cigarettes in a long clear amber holder, and drinking Vichy water. About eleven she said that she was tired, and rose from the table. The party broke up. *In the cloak-room she turned to Elinor.*

"Will you come and have tea with me one day?" she asked. "Then we can really talk, if I don't bore you, going on the way I do. I wish you would. I imagine you're dreadfully busy with your play, but the moment it's over I'll ring you up. May I?"

Elinor gave her permission.

Gus took leave of his guests in the entrance-hall. He laid a detaining hand on Elinor's arm.

"Wait for me," he whispered. When they had all gone, he turned to her.

"Come back to my flat," he said. "It's early yet."

His flat in Pall Mall was on the top floor, a tiny, converted upper part. He followed her into the small green sitting-room and switched on an electric fire, like lumps of sugar candy.

"May I get into a dressing-gown?" he asked. "There are drinks and cigarettes on the table. I shan't be a minute."

She poured herself out some soda-water and wandered about the room, sipping it, picking up books, and inspecting the French engravings on the walls. She came to rest by his desk, which was very neat and tidy, in contrast to her own. Everything on it looked expensive and as though it had come from Asprey's; there was a large shagreen ink-well, and two quill pens; a shagreen paper knife; his engagement block had a shagreen cover. The telephone book was covered in shagreen, and there was a shagreen cigarette-box on the table, a tortoise-shell one on the desk. Idly, thoughtlessly, she picked up a wide flat book bound in limp green leather, and opened it. It was filled with his handwriting in large paragraphs or brief lines, with gaps between; there were some Press-cuttings lying loose between the leaves. A sort of commonplace-book, she supposed. She began to

look through it, turning its pages. Here and there she recognised a quotation; she smiled over an epigram or two, awaiting use in some appropriate place in his work. She continued to turn the leaves, admiring the neatness and the delicacy of his writing, with scarcely an erasure. She took out one of the Press-cuttings; it was a page cut whole from *John o' London's Weekly*—a curious paper for him to read, she thought. She looked down it rapidly; it was an article on Disraeli's "Love-letters." It struck a chord in her memory. One or two passages were marked in pencil, as though to be copied. She read one of them:

"I do not know, or care to know, whether you are my equal or superior. I know that your society charms me."

She caught her breath, and then began to giggle over this, at having caught him out. So that was where the quotation in his letter had come from. She remembered his phrase: "I could say with Disraeli, whose letters I have just been reading . . ." The vanity of it! She laughed amusedly, without malice, and replaced the cutting. Again she turned the pages. A phrase caught her eye: "Shall I let my conceit override my discretion in the hope of your taking it as a compliment, and repeat that I do nothing but what I feel is good for me to do?" Other phrases followed. That letter again! Had he copied it down after writing it, or had it come from the pages of this book, written long before and used when the occasion arose? She went on reading, amused, though somehow not annoyed, aware now that she was prying, yet so intrigued that she could not refrain.

Gus came back into the room, wearing a dark brocaded dressing-gown, and slippers in tooled Florentine leather.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

She turned.

"Your commonplace-book. Do you mind?"

"No," he said, hesitantly. "I think I'd rather you didn't, though." He went over to her and took it from her, simply but firmly, laying it back on the desk.

"Come and sit down." He led her to the couch beside the fire, and sat beside her.

"Tell me, Gus," she said, laughingly, "tell me about that book."

"What about it?"

"How do you keep it? What do you put in it?"

"Anything that interests me. Notes for work, anything that comes into my head. Why?"

"I thought I recognised something . . . out of a letter you wrote me. *The letter*. Do you remember?"

He looked at her, with a mixture of embarrassment and annoyance in his eyes, the expression of a coward faced with his own meanness. The look puzzled her. She had not meant to accuse him.

"Don't look so guilty," she laughed. "I'm interested, that's all. Like Rosa Dartle, I just want to know."

"What?"

"How it came there. Did you copy it, or write it first?"

"I don't remember," he evaded her. "I suppose I made a draft of the letter, first. I usually do, if it's at all important."

"And then copied it into the book?"

"I suppose so."

"Because you thought it was good?"

"Yes." He faced her suddenly, with a gay, impertinent grin. "So it was, wasn't it?"

"Very," she smiled. "May I look to see it in print some time?"

"Why not?" he asked, mockingly.

"I shall be proud . . . of having inspired it."

"Hurt again?" he jabbed at her.

"Not in the least," she replied, with surprise. "I'm terribly interested."

He drew her to him, putting his arms around her. She leaned back, shifting herself, and then put her feet up. He laid his cheek against hers.

"Dear Elinor," he murmured.

"Comic Gus," she answered, and turned her face to be kissed.

"I never know when you're going to get offended all of a sudden," he said. "You dart about through life, taking no notice of all sorts of things, and then suddenly explode and get all hurt about something perfectly trifling."

"To you, perhaps."

"To anyone with your sense of proportion, I should have thought."

She moved fretfully in his arms.

"Don't go on," she said.

"Why not?"

"It isn't safe."

"What have I done now?"

"Nothing. Don't, that's all. Go on making me laugh."

"Fool!" He kissed her again, and slipped his hand inside the bosom of her dress.

"I didn't mean that when I said 'Make me laugh,' " she protested in amusement.

He laughed outright at this.

"I know you didn't."

"I meant, talk to me."

"I'm happier like this," he said, and drew her to him.

It was after two when she finally prepared to go.

"By the way," said Gus, "I promised I'd bring Sybil Trask to your first night. Will you see about our seats?" Her face fell. "What's the matter?"

"I'd hoped you'd be with me."

"My dear, you'll be all grand in the author's box."

"Oh no!" she protested. "I wanted you to come and stand at the back of the pit with me, or something. I'm not going to make a splash or take a call or anything like that."

"You'll have to sit in a box," he insisted. "It's expected of you."

"Well, sit with me, then. I shall need your support. Bring Lady Sybil along, if you like."

"All right," he answered. "I will. She'll be thrilled to death."

"The way the theatre thrills people!" Elinor commented. "You don't know how my friends are buzzing round and begging to be allowed to come to a rehearsal, asking questions about whether I have any say in the casting, and how a play is rehearsed, and whether anybody tells the actors when to stand up and sit down."

She went home, with a vague uneasiness in her mind. The whole evening faintly baffled her. She did not know why Gus had invited her, unless it was, as Lady Sybil had said, because she had asked him to do so. He had had an air of showing her off all through the dinner, as though she had acquired a new importance for him. Was it because Lady Sybil had manifested an interest in her? She had seen that he was impressed by the way the statesman had greeted her. She reflected, too, on their squabble while they were dancing. She had been wrong, perhaps, to have ventured her flippant comment on the intensity with which the lady had attacked her about Art and Life, spelling them with such vehement capitals; it had been indiscreet of her, but Gus had seldom hesitated to criticise her friends. Another point on which to be careful, she noted. Lady Sybil was going to be a nuisance, though, a tenacious nuisance, asking her to tea and yearning over her theories and aesthetics. If Gus wouldn't be bothered with Hermione . . . She checked that thought.

The incident of the commonplace-book only amused her; it betokened a vanity that tickled her sense of humour, a state of mind so utterly unlike anything in her own make-up. She thought of Schnitzler's one-act play, *Literature*, and laughed. But it was Gus's subsequent accusation of exploding over trifles that angered her. It was so untrue. They were not trifles in anyone she cared about. She hated to see Gus wriggle, evade charges by levelling them first at her, accuse her of pettiness. The injustice of it chafed her. If she did not love Gus, she wanted to be fond of him, not always to have to make allowances for minor dishonesties, minor shiftiness, which was why she had stopped him talking to-night, turning the situation to banter and love-making. She



despised herself for that, now. She should have fought it out, although she knew that nowhere could she have come to grips with it, that Gus would have eluded her, put her seemingly in the wrong. All the old fret that she had decided to dismiss the night of his letter and of their telephone conversation returned now, though confused in the memory of his embraces. He was vain; he was shallow, selfish, pettily-snobbish, casuist in his ethics, *arriviste*; she piled up the adjectives, and then countered them with another recital: gay, care-free, amusing and attractive; up to a point, even, considerate; and a good lover.

She reached her flat. The evening post had brought her a note from Brenda, inviting her to lunch, prompted, no doubt, by their meeting the week before. She decided to refuse. She did not wish to see Brenda. A sense of loyalty to Richard forbade it. Probably Brenda wanted to pump her about the Morrison girl; not that she would care, but she would be curious, treating any information with a deliberately off-hand malicious lightness. Elinor would not go. She turned her thoughts to Dick, wondering how he was dealing with his situation. It occurred to her that this was Thursday, the evening on which he had planned to take the girl out and attempt to talk to her.

Actually, Richard had absented himself from the office for the earlier part of the week. He had gone down there latish on the Wednesday afternoon, with a decided sense of misgiving and embarrassment at facing her again. He felt acutely self-conscious. She smiled at him pleasantly enough when he came in, and he could have kicked himself for the constraint and the deliberation of his manner, the incapacity which he felt for behaving naturally any more. He could not imagine that she would not notice it. He felt like a man who is trying to be normal and agreeable with someone from whom he is temporarily concealing some grave news; his cheerfulness strained and spurious, like the cheerfulness to his patient of the doctor when he comes out from a serious consultation with a specialist. After a few

moments he felt better, however; the thing seemed exaggerated and impossible. He lingered a little while, and then started to go, and turned back as though with an afterthought.

"Oh, by the way," he said, with an assumed casualness, "about to-morrow. Supposing we don't go to the theatre, but just dine quietly somewhere instead. What do you say?"

"Of course, if you'd rather," she replied, pleasantly enough. But he fancied he heard disappointment in her tone. After all, he had talked to her a lot about Chekhov and this particular play.

"Well, we needn't make up our minds now. We'll see to-morrow," he hedged. "I won't get tickets, anyway. We'll always be able to get them at the last minute if we want to."

He smiled at her and left the office. On the way downstairs a thought hit him suddenly. Was it disappointment that he had heard in her voice, or could it have been something else? Could she possibly think that he wanted to talk to her, that he had suggested missing the theatre because he wanted . . . his mind jibbed at forming the actual words, "to propose to her"? Could she have thought that? Had that vague reflection behind her tone been . . . again he hesitated over a word . . . modesty? A silly word, but that was what he meant. It sounded better in German: *Bescheidenheit*. His mind leaped to the songs of the other afternoon, transferring the quality of the emotion to her. Oh, God! could it be true that she felt like that about him?

He fetched her from the office on the following evening. She was neatly and prettily dressed in a blue afternoon frock, a little smarter than the more serviceable clothes that she usually wore for work. She put on a tight-fitting hat and a coat with a large fur collar, and they left the office. It was a quarter-past six; an awkward time—too early for dinner. The office was in a street near Covent Garden; it was a pleasant afternoon, and he suggested walking towards Piccadilly Circus, and finding a cocktail somewhere. They walked in

a silence which he found uncomfortable, until they reached the Carlton, where they went inside. There, self-consciousness overcame her; she seemed to retire into herself, to become over-careful and ladylike again, as she had been with Elinor. They sat down. She refused a cocktail, asking for an orangeade. Richard ordered a whisky-and-soda. He opened his cigarette-case and offered it to her. She took one and sat back, smoking and looking round her, though with a kind of discretion, as though she thought it not quite good manners to watch people.

The presence of an orchestra made their silence less embarrassing now, but he felt that he must talk. He started to speak of Elinor.

"What did you think of her?" he asked.

"She's nice. I liked her. Of course, one can't really tell, meeting anyone like that, but she was jolly. I liked her face, and her quick way of talking and jumping about from one thing to another. I should think she was kind; that she wouldn't be catty; I can't imagine her doing anything mean. And she didn't seem anxious to be clever and brilliant and showing off all the time, like some of the women writers who come into the office. She seemed natural."

"She is. She's never anything but herself."

"Well, I like that. I can't bear people who are always pretending to be something that they're not. . . . Have you known her long?"

"Elinor? Oh, lord, yes. Years. Since before the war. We first met in the gallery at Covent Garden at *Siegfried*, or rather in the queue outside. I was only a schoolboy. It's twenty years ago. You must have been just about being born then."

She smiled.

"How do you know how old I am?"

"I don't know. But I imagine you're about twenty."

"Go on telling me about Miss Johnson. Why hasn't she ever married?"

"She has. She was married to a painter who drank. She divorced him."

"Oh, poor thing!" said the girl. "I can't imagine anything worse than being married to a man who drank. I'm terrified of drunken men. I think it's beastly."

"He was, rather," Richard said, with a memory of Roly drunkenly embracing Elinor. "It takes people different ways. It used to make him violent and amorous."

"How filthy!" she shuddered, pulling a disgusted face. "But I think it's beastly whatever form it takes, whether it makes them violent or just rowdy."

"With some people you wouldn't know they *were* drunk." Richard thought of himself, whom drink only made morose or sentimental. "In fact, it sometimes improves them." He smiled.

"Does it?" She smiled, too. "All the same, I think I'd rather have them unimproved . . . that way." She seemed to push the subject away. "And she's never married again?"

"No. She was engaged to a man who was killed."

"Oh, poor thing!" she said again. "Yes, she looks as if she'd been unhappy."

"She has. Rottenly."

There was silence for a moment, and then she asked, lightly:

"Why aren't *you* married? Or are you?"

He was utterly startled. It was the last thing he had been expecting.

"Why do you ask?" he parried, to gain time.

"Shouldn't I have? I'm sorry. I just wondered."

"What made you think I might be?"

"Anybody might be, mightn't they?"

He decided to say it now. He had intended to wait until after dinner, in the seclusion of the little Soho restaurant where they had dined together before, but here was his opportunity.

"As a matter of fact, I am," he said, not looking at her but at the signet ring that he was turning on his finger.

"There you are!" she answered, brightly. "As a matter of fact, I thought you were. Miss Ellis said so."

"Miss Ellis?"

"Yes, in the office."

"What made her say so?"

"I don't know. She was talking about you. She said she thought you were married."

"And you said?"

"I said, 'Oh.' What did you expect me to say?"

"When was this?"

"Yesterday. . . . No, the day before. Why?"

He did not answer for a moment, while he considered this. Then he spoke, still looking at his hands.

"Did you notice the woman who came up and talked to us after the concert on Saturday?"

"Yes." She seemed suddenly to be holding her breath.

"Well . . . that was my wife."

"Are you divorced?"

"No." At last he looked up at her. "Well?"

"Well?" She returned his gaze.

"That's all." He made a vague, dismissing gesture. The orchestra broke into *Madam Butterfly*.

"I'd like to hear that sung really beautifully just once," she said quite suddenly, and in a tone so different that he gasped. "I've only heard it in English, badly done, and I didn't really like it. But I'd like to hear it once with a really lovely voice, and get all sentimental about it."

"Are you?" he asked, mechanically, bewildered by this sudden change of topic.

"Sentimental? Me? Terribly! May I have another cigarette?"

He gave her one. It was past seven. People in evening-dress were beginning to come in for dinner. She showed no signs of wanting to leave. Her glass of orangeade was still half full. She just sat smoking, with a hard, bright little smile fixed on her face.

"Are we going to the theatre?" he asked at last.

"I'd like to," she answered. "Ought we to be leaving?"

"Well, if we're going."

She began collecting her things.

"You haven't finished your drink."

"I don't want it, thanks."

He summoned the waiter and paid him. When they got to the door it was raining.

"Taxi, sir?" asked the doorman.

He turned to her.

"Why don't we dine here?" he said. "Downstairs in the Grill?"

"If you'd rather," she replied, meekly.

They parted at their respective cloak-rooms. While he washed he went over their conversation in his mind, trying to grasp the situation. She had known that he was married, had known it for two days, but she had not known it last Saturday when Elinor had seen them at the concert and had read in her face that she loved him. She had wanted corroboration, had asked him gaily enough, taken it brightly enough. But then she had been prepared, prepared not to give herself away, prepared to take it lightly, as she had. But she had taken it almost too lightly; her sudden change of conversation to the subject of *Madam Butterfly* had been, now that he reflected on it, too like a stage effect. She was a good actress, but not good enough to deceive him. But that was because he knew it to be acting; or, rather, believed it to be. Supposing it wasn't? Supposing Elinor was wrong? Supposing she didn't care? Well, that was what he wanted, wasn't it? Wasn't it?

She was waiting for him when he came out, and smiled at him pleasantly enough. She had no suggestions about what she wanted to eat, and allowed him to order for her, merely saying that she was not hungry, and when he proposed oysters, that she did not care for them. She accepted the waiter's alternative of smoked salmon. She talked about oysters while they waited for the food to be served, how she had tried one once and had not liked it, how nothing would induce her to try again. She made a great deal of the subject. Yes, she was acting; he was convinced of it now.

She continued to be bright and unconcerned as the

meal went on, but he noticed that it seemed to be becoming more and more of an effort. After a while she stopped talking, and then suddenly laid down her knife and fork and bent her head so that he could not see her face. But he could see that she was biting her lips, guessed that she was trying to control tears. She found a handkerchief from her bag, and blew her nose. He kept his eyes averted from her. What was he to do? What was he to say?

It was she who spoke first, looking at her little gold wrist-watch.

"Oughtn't we to be going?" she asked. "It's ten past eight. We don't want to be late. I don't want anything more to eat."

She did not look at him as she spoke, but opened her bag and began to busy herself with her mirror and powder-puff, holding the bag up between them.

"Let's not go to the theatre," he said. "I want to talk to you."

"Oh, please, I'd like to," she said. "You've talked so much about it."

"Another evening."

"These are the last two weeks."

"Well, any evening you like. Not to-night. I want to talk."

"What about?"

"Don't you know?"

She replaced her bag on the table, and reached to the chair-back behind her for her coat. Her eyes were frightened.

"No, I don't want to," she said, agitatedly. "If you don't want to see the Chekhov, let's go to something else. A revue, or anything. A picture, if you like."

"Won't you let me talk to you?" He made his voice gentle and persuasive.

She paused in her movements.

"Where?" she asked.

"Here. Anywhere."

"We can't talk here."

"Well, come back to my place, then. Won't you?"

"I'd rather go out." There was alarm in her voice.

"Please, Marjorie."

It was the first time he had called her by her name, and it arrested her. She stared at him and then lowered her eyes.

"Very well," she said.

He paid the bill and they left. Outside it was still raining. They found a taxi. She sat very upright, staring out of one window, while he gazed in front of him.

Again it was she who spoke first, and again she attempted to talk brightly of unimportant things—of the rain, and the traffic, and the picture at the Plaza.

"Marjorie, don't," he said.

"Don't what?"

"Talk like that."

She turned to him.

"What do you want to say to me?" she asked sharply.

"I don't know . . . like this."

"Then let me go home," she said. "Let me get out here. I get a Tube from Piccadilly Circus."

"No, please. Come back with me."

"What for?" she cried, suddenly. "You've nothing to say to me. You can't have."

"Can't I?"

"Please, let me go," she begged.

"Marjorie, we've got to talk."

"But what about?" she cried again. "What is there to talk about?"

"Us." He laid his hand on hers.

"What about us?"

"Everything. We've got to know how we stand."

"How we stand? What is there to know?"

"I've got to explain."

"But what?"

"I'm married . . ." he began.

"But I knew that. What do you mean?"

"I'd like to tell you about it."

"I don't want to know."

"I want you to. Please. I want you to understand. There are things I've got to say to you."



"All right."

She subsided and became silent again, as the taxi went up Regent Street and Portland Place. He was still holding her hand and she was looking away from him at the rain-spattered window. He thought that she was crying, but he could not be sure. At last the taxi stopped outside his rooms. They went upstairs, and he turned on the light in his sitting-room, plainly, commonly furnished, as he had taken it over from its previous occupant. There was a banked-down fire burning in the grate; and the room was exactly as he had left it when he went out, with open books and papers, an empty glass on the floor beside his chair, and a half-filled ash-tray with weighted leather straps hanging across the arm. On the mantelpiece, between large ornaments, were two photographs: one was of Brenda, and the other of Elinor, taken several years ago.

"Let me take your things," he said, as he closed the door. He helped her off with her coat, and she pulled off her hat and gloves, handing them to him without looking at him. He laid them on a chair, and she went to the fireplace, looking at herself in the mirror of the overmantel. He saw her give a quick glance at Brenda's picture and then look down at the fire, holding out her hands to it. He poured himself out a drink and came to join her at the fireplace.

"Well?" she said.

"I suppose you think I'm a cad," he began.

"Why?"

"For not telling you I was married, until you asked. I wonder if you'll believe me when I say that I was going to tell you to-night, anyway."

"Of course I'll believe you. I knew you were."

"You knew?"

"Yes."

"How? When did you know?"

"Yesterday, when you came into the office, looking like you did, after you'd been away three days."

"How did I look?"

"Like the cat that's eaten the canary."

"And you knew that I was going to tell you that?"

"Yes. I knew that was why you didn't want to go to the theatre."

"Because Miss Ellis had told you?"

"Partly."

"You didn't know on Saturday, at the concert?"

"No. What made you decide to tell me? Was it seeing her there like that?"

"Not exactly."

"Why did you think you had to?"

"Well . . . it's only fair, isn't it? I ought to have told you before."

"Ought you?" She was leaning with her arm on the mantelpiece, staring at the fire.

"Surely. My dear, I'm not a philanderer. Please believe me. I just didn't realise."

"What?"

"That I wasn't being fair to you."

"How . . . fair?"

"In letting you think . . ."

"Think what?" she interrupted sharply.

"In letting you think perhaps I meant something that I didn't mean."

"I see. What makes you think I did think so?"

"I don't," he lied. "I only thought perhaps you might think so. That's why I wanted to tell you."

"I see," she said again; and then, after a pause, added brightly: "Well, that's all right then!" and looked up at him, smiling. "Is that all?"

He gave it up, helplessly.

"I suppose so," he said.

She sat down in an arm-chair.

"These are furnished rooms, aren't they?" she asked. "Have you been here long?"

"Only a few weeks."

"Do you like them?"

"Not much. They 'do'; that's about all."

"And before you were here?"

"I was at my club. And before that I lived with my wife."

"You've not been separated long, then?"

"About two months."

"Have you been married long?"

"Eight years."

"She's very beautiful," she said.

"Yes."

"I wondered on Saturday who she was. I could see that it upset you, seeing her. I thought perhaps she was part of your past."

"She is," he answered.

"What happened?" she asked; and then, as he did not reply, she added defensively: "You said you wanted to tell me about it."

"I do," he answered, and then paused again. "Only it's not very easy. You see, I'm still in love with her."

She turned her head away. He began to talk, to try and tell her about his marriage, of its failure and his own loneliness. He walked about the room as he did so. The words came with difficulty. It was hard to talk with her sitting there like that, upright in the arm-chair, staring at the wall beside her so that he could not see her face. Besides, he did not know why he was telling her; he did not know what the recital was leading to. He leaned against the door and then, suddenly, he saw that she was weeping, really weeping now. Her shoulders were moving, although she made no sound, and although her face was turned from him, he knew that tears were running down it. He stopped in his narrative. There was a long silence.

"Marjorie," he said. She made no answer. He went over to her.

"Marjorie," he said again, and put his hand on her shoulder. She shook it off.

"Don't," she said. "Go away. Leave me alone."

"Marjorie . . . Marjorie dear."

"Don't!" she repeated violently, and then, as he did not move, she got up quickly and walked over to the window, keeping her back to him. He remained where he was, and she stood, staring into the street, doing things with her handkerchief. He could hear her

breath, now, in little sobs. At last she spoke in a tight, small voice:

"Do you mind . . . turning out the light?" she asked.

He obeyed, and then returned to the fireplace and stood there a long while. It seemed as though the silence would never end, and then suddenly she broke down completely and fell against the window, sobbing, with her face against her arm. He went over to her and put his arms round her. She made no effort to resist.

"Marjorie dear," he said. "Come and sit down. Come back to the fire. Don't stand there like that."

He led her to the fireplace, his arm still round her shoulder, keeping it there, holding her gently to him. He put her into a chair and seated himself on the arm. She leaned forward, still crying bitterly. He began to stroke her hair.

"Don't," he said, gently. "Don't cry. It's all right. Don't cry."

She made no answer and he drew her back to him, holding her in his arms. She leaned her head against him, and he bent his, kissing her forehead. He could feel her trembling. Still she did not speak. He held her close for a long time, while her sobs grew quieter. Her hand went out and found his, drew it to her face, where she laid it against her cheek, kissing it, pressing it against her lips, forcing his fingers gently between them.

"My dear," he whispered.

She went on kissing his fingers. He felt horribly lonely, utterly remote from her, moved to a deep tenderness and pity, but no more. He continued stroking her hair with his other hand, murmuring, "My dear. My dear." He was conscious of being very uncomfortable, perched on the arm of the chair; moreover, he was sitting on the ash-tray. He shifted his position, and she turned, staring up into his face, trying to see it in the dark. He knelt beside her.

"Marjorie dear," he said again, and put his arms round her, his cheek against hers, his hand on her hand. They remained so for a long while, staring into the fire.

*At last she spoke.*

"Why do you do this?" she asked.

"What?"

"Hold me like this?"

"I'm very fond of you," he said.

"Are you?" There was no tone in her voice. It was like a breath, no more.

"Very fond."

"But you love . . . her."

"Yes," he said simply. "I can't help it."

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "Sorry for *you*."

"Thank you," he answered. She turned her head ever so slightly to look at him. By the firelight they could see each other's eyes, dark and troubled.

"My dear," she whispered, and then took his face in her hands and kissed him on the mouth, gently at first, and then suddenly with passion. Then she lay back as though exhausted, her eyes closed. He rose and stood looking down at her, flooded with pity and helplessness.

She stirred.

"I'd better go," she said, and then sat up, putting her hand to her forehead.

"Marjorie dear," he said, "I do want you to understand."

"Of course I understand," she answered. "I'm sorry to have made a scene."

"You haven't. You've been very dear, and very sweet."

She shook her head.

"I've behaved disgracefully," she said. "Don't let it bother you, though. It won't happen again. You'd better put on the light." She rose.

"You're really going?"

She nodded.

"When shall I see you again?"

"You won't," she answered quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"After this? After the way I've behaved?"

"My dear . . ."

"Please," she said, her voice trembling a little  
"Put on the light. Let me go."

"I can't, like this. Marjorie, you mustn't feel like that about it."

"How else?"

"We can't part like this. You can't go away feeling like that. We've got to talk."

"No. What is there to say?"

"We've got to know . . . how we feel."

"Don't we?" she asked, with a little laugh.

"We've got to know what we think. Half the trouble in life is caused not by what other people think, but by what we think they're thinking."

"That's why you told me . . . about your wife?"  
It was a question.

"Yes."

"Well, then . . . I know."

"And you want to go . . . not to see me again?"

"I can't."

"What about the office?"

"I shall leave."

"No. You mustn't do that."

"There's nothing else to do."

"Marjorie, don't. You make me hate myself. If I've made you unhappy . . ."

"You haven't. It's not your fault." She came close to him. "You mustn't be unhappy about me. You mustn't be unhappier than you are."

"How can I help it? I've hurt you . . ."

"You haven't. It wasn't you. My dear, don't. . . ."  
She put her hand on his shoulder. "I want you to be happy."

He laid his hand on hers.

"Marjorie, what can I say?"

"Nothing." She smiled at him. "Only let me go."

"To what? You're not happy, either. You've told me. You don't like your home."

"No."

"Well, then . . ."

"What's to be done about it? What can *you* do?"

"I should never have taken you out, in the first place—never have come into your life. That was selfish of me, thoughtless. But I was glad of you. I wasn't philandering. Please believe that. But I was glad of you. I liked having you with me."

"Did you?"

"Awfully. I didn't think of *you*; I thought only of myself. I suppose that is philandering. The seducer's touch."

"Oh, no!" she cried.

"Forgive me."

"Don't," she pleaded. "Don't talk like that."

"I meant no harm."

"My dear, don't. Don't accuse yourself."

"I blame myself."

"Then don't. If it's made you happy to have me with you, that's all I want. I'm glad of that."

"It has."

"Then that's all right."

"But you . . . it's made you unhappy."

She shook her head.

"It's made me happy, too. Terribly happy. I'm glad you've talked as you have. You were right. One must know what the other thinks."

"You still want . . . not to see me again?"

"I don't know." She hesitated.

"If it's best for you . . ." he wavered.

"Do you want me?"

"I can't answer that. It isn't fair."

She stroked his cheek.

"Don't answer, then. It's all right. We can forget to-night, now that we know; or, rather, remember it and be friends in spite of it—because of it, perhaps. It won't happen again. I'm all right now."

"My dear, I'm afraid . . . for you."

"You needn't be." He heard a smile in her voice. "Will you kiss me, once . . . nicely . . . for luck?"

He kissed her. Her answering kiss was sweet and gentle. She released herself.

"Now turn on the light."

She stood with her hand over her eyes, to shield them from the sudden glare. Then slowly she lowered it, and smiled at him. She was in full possession of herself again.

"Give me my bag," she said.

He gave it her. She repaired her face in the mirror, and then put on her hat and coat.

"Can I take you to the station?"

She shook her head.

"I'll walk," she said.

He took her downstairs to the door.

"Good-night," she whispered.

"Good-night, my dear. We meet again?"

She nodded, smiled and then was gone.

He went back to his room, and stood leaning on the mantelpiece, wondering.



## IX

NANCY wanted to give a party for Elinor's first night, and invite "everybody in London." The phrase was hers. But the Morris Bairds had already arranged a party for the cast and a number of leading theatrical figures. When told of this, Nancy suggested that they should amalgamate; she was thrilled at the idea of playing hostess to celebrities; once inside her house they could probably be induced to come again. She was very hurt and disappointed when Elinor told her the amalgamation was impossible.

Elinor, indeed, was in a rather difficult position over her first night. She was given a box for herself and half a dozen complimentary stalls for her friends; but all of them seemed to expect free tickets, and they numbered heavily. She was expected to be at the Morris Bairds' party, but her friends were also making claims on her. She had acquired a new importance for them. Winkie was returning from Biarritz; Nancy and Cynthia and Hermione were all ordering new evening-dresses for the occasion.

"You must be with us," Nancy protested. "After all, we *are* your friends, and these theatre people don't mean a thing to you, really. I'll tell you what to do. I'll give my party, and you just look in at the other one first—show yourself, you see—and then come on to mine, and bring anyone you can with you. See?"

So that was how it was settled, and Nancy went to Hermione and asked her to invite any Press-people that she could persuade to come, and the invitations went out on Nancy's visiting cards, with "11.30. Whoopce" in the left-hand bottom corner.

All Elinor's friends, too, had begged to be allowed

to come and watch a rehearsal, and there had been an afternoon when Nancy had asked if she might "creep in at the back somewhere," and then had brought Hermione with her, and sat talking in loud whispers in the stalls. On that occasion there had been a scene; Eileen Barringer had stopped in the middle of a tender love-passage and screamed violently from the stage:

"Will you stop talking in front there? How the hell can I be expected to rehearse with all that bloody row going on?" And Morris had taken up the cudgels on her behalf, and shouted out: "Who is it? Who are those people? *What are they doing here?*" Nancy and Hermione had shivered, terrified, like two schoolgirls, huddling in their seats; but Morris Baird had descended on them, asking who the hell they were; and Elinor, who had been engaged on something else upstairs in the office, had descended in time to see them leaving the theatre in a considerable and undignified hurry, and had herself received a lecture about bringing strangers to rehearsal. After that she brought no more, and was thankful to have a reason for refusing. Nancy, once away from the theatre, had been very indignant; she said she had never been spoken to like that in her life before. She seemed to think it was Elinor's fault, and was very angry, but she had been genuinely frightened while it lasted.

At the Dress Rehearsal, however, Elinor took Gus with her, and they sat quietly enough in the Dress Circle, among the maids and less distinguished acquaintances of the company, who had also been permitted to attend. It was a very ill-starred rehearsal; lights went wrong, and doors refused to open and shut; there were enormous waits between the changes of scene. Elinor grew bored and restless; the play seemed to have ceased to be any concern of hers for so long now. After the second act Gus said:

"Must we stop? It's after ten already. We've been here since seven, and we've got to see it all over again to-morrow night. Can't we go away? There doesn't seem to be anything for you to do."

So they left and, on an inspiration of Elinor's, went

to the Palladium, and listened to Lily Morris singing "The Old Apple-Tree" and "Come on, Mrs. Scott," and a song, before the curtain, about christening the baby, in which she invited the audience to join in the chorus. The house was full and very appreciative. They joined in noisily:

"Then Doctor Jellicoe  
Who'd just looked in, you know,  
Said, 'Why make all this fuss?  
'Cos the baby's not a she,  
*It's a he the same as me.*  
So shall we call him "Gus"?'  
And then we all said, 'Yus!'"

The final "Yus" came with a shout; even Gus was singing. All his fastidious self-consciousness seemed to have left him. Elinor felt as though they were a pair of children playing truant from school, absurdly young and happy. Then conscience awoke in her, and she insisted on returning to her rehearsal; but she herself sang in the taxi, loudly and childishly, with her arm through his, jogging up and down.

"So shall we call him "Gus"?'  
And then we all said, 'Yus!'"

"Idiot!" said Gus, and laughed, and kissed her.

The last act was still in progress when they got back, and she found that she had not been missed. It all seemed very dull and silly, after their hilarious interlude. Morris Baird came up to her when the curtain finally dropped, and insisted on taking her out to supper. Gus and Julia Baird came too.

"Different boy-friend," Morris whispered playfully, squeezing her waist. She realised he was thinking of Richard.

After supper Gus took her home and put her to bed, and was very gay and lover-like.

"Let's go away the week-end," he said. "It's Whitsun, and it's ages since we have."

"Yes, I'd love to."

They made arrangements for meeting the following

evening, and he kissed her good-night. It was nearly four when he left.

But, unimportant as the Dress Rehearsal had seemed, it was with a sense of apprehension that she awoke on the following morning, not unlike the sensation of an impending examination or a visit to the dentist. It remained with her all day. Evelyn came up from school on special permission for the play. Her mother and Jack were going to it together, and Evelyn was to sit with Elinor in her box. She spent the afternoon with her, changing in Elinor's bedroom and dining with her in the flat, although she could scarcely eat for excitement. About seven o'clock a box of orchids arrived from Gus.

Elinor had the stage-box at the theatre. The house was already nearly full when she arrived and took her seat at the back of the box, so as not to be seen. Gus and Lady Sybil were already in their places; Lady Sybil was dressed in white, as before, very cool and beautiful. She rose and kissed Elinor as she came in, rather to her embarrassment. Evelyn took the fourth place. When the curtain rose, Elinor pulled her chair forward so that she could look at the house. Morris and Julia were in the box opposite; she could see all her friends in the stalls, their heads raised, staring up at the stage. Tom and Cynthia were in the front row; he looked up and smiled at her; Hermione, half-way back, had Ham Sotherington with her and, two rows in front, sat Betsy Hartog with a young man whom she recognised as Paul Fairless. Norman Clifford was not present. He had written her a brief, pompous note, wishing her success and excusing himself from attending, on the ground that he had to conduct a concert in Harrogate on the following evening, and needed complete rest and concentration for twenty-four hours in advance.

During the first act she noticed Roly in the Dress Circle, and Angie, and Richard, with Marjorie Morrison, and in the front row of the Upper Circle, Belinda with the Scotsman.

In the intervals people came to her box to see her,

but she suddenly felt that she could not face them. Playwriting seemed a horribly intimate and personal form of self-advertisement, here at her own first night, after years of the detachment of launching novels on the world. For almost the first time in her life she found herself suffering from nerves. She retired to the private lavatory attached to the box, and shut herself in between the acts. The play, however, appeared to be going well, as far as she could judge, but she had heard and seen it so often now that it seemed almost meaningless. For the most part she did not even look at the stage, but watched the audience instead. She could see Winkie, bored and restless, wriggling in her seat, turning round and signalling to people, trying to see the back of the Dress Circle from the fifth row of the stalls. Mrs. Anthony, pretty and graceful in black, looked up with a shyly proud smile at Evelyn in the author's box.

At last it was over. The curtain fell. There was a lot of applause, which she realised rather than heard. There were shouts of "Author." Julia Baird was making signs to her from the opposite box, indicating that she should go upon the stage. She retreated into the corner. Morris Baird came in.

"Come on, honey," he said. "I'll take you on. This way, quick."

"No," said Elinor, shrinking back against the wall. She felt suddenly panic-stricken and helpless; her assurance had deserted her.

"What the hell——? Come on, now."

"No, no. I won't. I won't take a call."

"Listen. They're shouting for you. You gotta say thank-you."

Elinor looked back at the stage. The curtain was going up and down. Eileen Barringer was peeping into the wings and making pretty gestures of futility at the audience.

"Come on. They know you're here."

"No, I've gone," persisted Elinor. "I don't want to go on. Don't make me. Don't make me."

She was suddenly almost hysterical. Morris Baird

took her by the arm. Evelyn was pressing her to go, and Gus and Lady Sybil had turned round and were applauding into the back of the box. The audience's attention was being directed to them. She looked down at the faces in the stalls all gazing upwards, and then at the stage, where Eileen Barringer had spotted her at last and was beckoning to her. Of a sudden her nerves and her hysteria deserted her. She felt quite calm, but very angry. It was a ridiculous scene, and she had to stop it as quickly as she could.

"All right, I'll come," she said.

"Attagirl!" Morris Baird piloted her from the box and through an iron door. She found herself in the wings among switches and buckets and electricians and pieces of furniture. She could still hear the applause, but could not see the audience. Then the curtain went up again, and just as Morris Baird said, "On with you," and gave her a push, Eileen Barringer stepped to the foot-lights and began making a speech. Elinor was saved.

"That's all right," she said, and turned away.

"You go next time."

"No, I'm damned if I do," she laughed, perfectly good-humoured again. "They'll go home now."

She turned away from the stage. She heard the curtain come down again, and somebody shout, "House-lights." Eileen Barringer was swearing about something as she came off. Then she saw Elinor, rushed at her and kissed her.

"Naughty girl!" she said. "Why didn't you take a call? What did you think of it? Were you pleased? Come upstairs and tell me all about it. Hullo, Morris darling! Bless you for the flowers."

She was dragged into a dressing-room bright with lights, thrust on to a sofa and given a drink. People poured in and were introduced; they congratulated, raved and gushed. There was no room to move. She kept getting in the way of legs. She felt rather dazed and very detached. "You'll run a year," she heard someone say. At last she struggled to her feet.

"I must go," she said.

Eileen Barringer looked at her as though she had forgotten who she was.

"Bless you," she murmured. "I'll see you at the party."

Elinor went up some stone steps, down which people were thronging. She fought her way to the stage-door, where Gus and the others were waiting. Gus was carrying her cloak and bag.

"I've got a taxi," he said. "Where do we go?"

"Morris's party won't start for hours," she answered. "They're all down there still. We'd better go to Nancy's first."

They handed Evelyn over to her mother, who was waiting with them. "What a very delightful evening," Mrs. Anthony said. "I do congratulate you. I enjoyed it so much, but I was disappointed that you didn't take a call."

"Why didn't you?" Evelyn asked her. "Why didn't you want to?"

"I hadn't got the proper make-up," Elinor replied, with a laugh.

"How do you feel?" Gus asked, as they drove off.

"Damned silly," she answered.

"I think it was wonderful," said Lady Sybil.

"I'll never do it again," said Elinor. "I told you I wanted to be at the back of the pit."

"I can't imagine anything more thrilling than one's own first night," Lady Sybil exclaimed.

The house in Lowndes Street was brilliantly lighted. Nancy had had an awning erected and a red carpet laid on the pavement. There were a lot of men-servants in the hall.

"Darling!" Nancy came flying down the stairs to meet her. "How quick you've been! I didn't expect you for hours. It was marvellous. Why didn't you make a speech? We all shouted for you. Come upstairs. There's hardly anybody here yet."

She took her up to the drawing-room and gave her some champagne. Sam came up and thumped her on

the back. He was wearing a red carnation and looked very prosperous.

"Jolly good show," he said.

People began to arrive. She could hear Winkie running up and down the landing, greeting friends, and calling out, "My sweet, my sweet, my sweet," like an overwound clockwork canary. The room began to fill up. People pressed all round her, offering congratulations. Nancy was being very excited, trying to see everybody at once.

"There's food downstairs. There's food downstairs," she was crying. "Elinor darling, you must be famished. Come down and have some food."

Winkie saw her when she was half-way down the stairs, and emitted a scream.

"Elinor darleeng!" She pushed through the crowd, and battled her way down the staircase, nearly knocking two men over the banisters. "How are you, my sweet?" She hugged her violently. "I only got back this afternoon. Come and talk to me. I've got such lots to tell you."

She dragged her into the dining-room, and got her wedged into a corner.

"My dear, what do you think? I'm going to have a baby!" Somebody trod on her, and she squealed, "Oh, my little feet!" Then she turned back to Elinor. "Don't you think it's too exciting? It's going to be born in January, and then I'm going back to the stage. Elinor, you're not listening."

"Yes, darling, I am, only it's rather hard to hear."

"Come upstairs, then. Let's go into Nancy's boudoir. Then we can talk properly."

"Darling, I can't. Not now. I've got to go in a minute." She tried to get up.

"Elinor, you *are* selfish."

"I must, Winkie. Ring me up."

"Do you like my little frock? It was ever so 'spensive. All bought in your honour, too. Why didn't you make a speech?" Then she caught sight of the food. "Oo,



caviar! Winkie wants some caviar. Winkie's got a craving! Winkie *must* have caviar!"

She fought her way to the table. Elinor stood where she was, helplessly, waiting for someone to rescue her. Gus had disappeared; at least, she could not see him in the crowd. She felt incapable of moving. The noise was prodigious. Everyone was talking of himself. Her head was aching badly. Then her brother Tom came up to her.

"Hullo," he whispered. "What a bloody row!"

"Tom darling," she gasped, "get me out of this. I can't stand it. Take me into a back room somewhere, and get me a sandwich and some soda-water."

He took her into a small quiet sitting-room and brought her food. She lay back in an arm-chair, exhausted.

"Dear Tom," she murmured. "What did you think of it all?"

"It went jolly well, I think," he answered. "I felt damn sorry for you. I was terrified they were going to drag you on to that stage. How soon can I decently escape, do you think?"

Hermione put her head round the door.

"Oh, there you are!" she said. "I've been looking for you everywhere. It really seems to have been quite a success. I do think you ought to have made a speech, though. My dear, *who* do you think Betsy brought with her? The Fairless boy! Oh, here's Ham Sotherington. I want you to know him. Ham, this is Elinor."

Elinor shook hands, and looked round her.

"I've got to go," she said. "I'm supposed to have been at another party hours ago."

"Morris Baird's?" asked Ham Sotherington. "We're going on there, too. Can we take you?"

"Oh, thanks. I had some people with me. I don't know what's become of them."

"Sybil Trask and a man? Oh, they've gone. Sybil came over all queer. She asked someone to say good-bye to you. I heard her doing it."

"Did Gus go, too?"

"Was that Gus Benford? I thought I recognised him. He said he'd go on to the Bairds' after taking Sybil home. Shall we go?"

In the doorway they met Betsy, very formidable in blue sequins. She looked at Ham Sotherington beligerently.

"You're the young man Hermione thinks is going to do the scenery for Norman's operas, aren't you?" she demanded.

He fidgeted with his tie.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," he said nervously.

"Never mind," retorted Betsy. "You will." She turned to Elinor. "Well, you've had a nice success, my dear," she said warmly. "Why didn't you make a speech?"

In the hall, as she passed through it on her way upstairs to fetch her cloak, she found Paul Fairless leaning against the wall, his hands in his pockets, smoking sulkily, the ash from his cigarette dropping on to the carpet. He looked, as he stood there, like an ill-tempered man waiting in a dressmaker's shop while his wife is being fitted in an inner room.

"Hullo," she said, brightly.

He looked up, straightened himself and took the cigarette unwillingly from his mouth. Again she was struck by the beauty of his face, sensitive yet firmly modelled, and by the shabbiness of his dress-suit, the silk shiny, the coat-collar standing away at the back, showing a bone collar-stud, and his shoes thick and unpolished.

"Oh, hullo," he replied. "Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"It all seemed very gratifying." She heard sarcasm in his voice, and answered it quietly.

"Yes. All in such nice taste, wasn't it?" she said, mockingly.

He regarded her with an amused surprise.

"What's that?" he asked.

"It's what charwomen say about funerals. You don't look as if you were enjoying the wake."

"I'm not," he answered, his face relapsing to surly moodiness. "I'm not a friend of the family. Or the corpse."

"I'm sure you're very welcome," she returned lightly. "Why don't you go and find yourself a drink? Let me introduce you to some of the pretty ladies."

"You don't know who I am."

"I do. You're Paul Fairless, aren't you?" she said, surprised.

"How do you know?"

"Well, I've met you before. With Lydia Walsh, don't you remember?"

"Yes, but . . ." He did not finish his reply.

"And I've heard plenty about you, since."

"Betsy?" he said, a shade contemptuously.

"Yes. How's that going?"

"It's not," he answered, briefly. "That won't come to anything."

"I don't see why not."

"Perhaps you don't know the parties concerned."

She was genuinely puzzled by this. Apparently he knew nothing of her connection with the matter, was not aware that it was she who had introduced him. Then she remembered Hermione's telling her that Betsy claimed to have found him sleeping on the Embankment. She did not enlighten him.

"Well, good luck anyway," she said, and left him. "I don't wonder Hermione found him ungracious," she thought, as she went upstairs.

"Darling, you're not going?" Nancy cried at her as she came from the bedroom, wearing her cloak.

"I must. There's the other party. I'll come back, if I can."

"Do," Nancy kissed her. "Is Mr. Benford going with you? He really is rather thrilling, isn't he? I wish you'd bring him to lunch some time. I'd like to see more of him. And, darling . . ." She hesitated, fingering Elinor's collar. "Don't you think you might treat yourself to a new cloak? This one really is rather past it."

Elinor shook herself impatiently.

"It's dark outside," she said.

"Was Richard Gilchrist there?" Nancy went on. "I didn't see him and, as I had Brenda coming, I didn't like to ask him to-night. I hope he won't be offended. Have you got his address? I'll write to him and ask him to lunch. Brenda's got a rather marvellous young man with her, but she's looking terribly ill. Does she dope, do you think? I've often wondered. It might account for her being . . ." She made a vague gesture. "They say it does."

"What nonsense," said Elinor, irritably, and then kissed her. "Good-bye, darling. It's a lovely party."

She began to go downstairs.

"You're coming back!" Nancy called after her.

She left with Hermione and Ham Sotherington in a taxi. The young man was pale and weedy and a little effeminate; he looked rather like a schoolboy during the trying period described as "outgrowing his strength." Hermione talked about Betsy during the whole of the drive; Elinor lay exhausted in her corner.

The Bairds had hired an entire restaurant for their party. It was filled with theatre people, and there was a great deal of noise going on.

Julia Baird kissed Elinor, said, "It was wonderful," and led her to a chair, where, with a hasty introduction of "This is the authoress," she left her. The other occupants of the table smiled at her, said it had been a huge success, asked whether she wasn't pleased and why she hadn't made a speech, and then, when a waiter came up with champagne, resumed their own conversations. An elderly lady, seated beside her, who was very deaf and had apparently not heard Julia's briefly flung announcement, turned to her kindly and said:

"You must be very tired after acting all the evening. Try some of that chicken mousse. It's very good."

Presently Eileen Barringer spied her from the table where she was holding a court, rose in her seat and cried at the top of her voice:

"Elinor! Darling! Come over here. Come and sit by

me. Move, everybody. I must have my darling wonderful authoress by my side. Everybody: let me introduce you. This is the brilliant clever lady who wrote all those wonderful things I had to say to-night. Miss Elinor Johnson!"

She lifted her glass, kissed it to Elinor, drank and then pulled her down beside her.

"Darling," she chattered, "why are you so late? Where have you been? I've been looking for you everywhere. Tell me everything you thought about the play, and especially about me. Was there anything you didn't like? Any little tiny thing? Were you really pleased? Really pleased with me? Oh, aren't you sweet? Aren't you a darling? Oh, there's Carlo. My Carlo, the finest pianist in Europe. Carlo *mio*. Carlo! *Vieni qui. Qui!* Carlo!"

She called out in limited but showy Italian, waving both her arms excitedly, to attract the attention of a dark, sleek young man who came to the table, and bent across it to kiss her hand. She squeezed closer to Elinor, making room for him on the other side of her.

"Carlo Berletti," she whispered. "He's the divinest musician, and such an angel. Don't you adore Italians? I'm mad about them. *Come sta, Carlo mio, come sta?*"

She put her arm round the Italian's neck.

"Carlo and I love each other, don't we, Carlo?" she cried, relapsing into English. "We understand each other. We've got the same temperament. Passionate, eh, Carlo?"

"You passionate?" he responded, gaily playing up to her. "No! You are cold. You are all ice. You 'ave no fire, you; you do not love me, no."

"Oh, Carlo, how can you say such cruel things to me?"

She began rallying him, holding her glass to his lips, petting and teasing him. Elinor was forgotten. She looked round the room, searching for Gus, but he was nowhere to be seen. Her head was aching and she was very tired. She wondered how soon she could go home. Her eyes closed, and her head nodded. She was awakened

two seconds later by the band, and by Morris Baird coming up to ask her to dance.

"Looks like we got a hit," he commented. "You done a good job, sweetheart. Next thing we got to think about is the States. What about coming over in the Fall? I've got a girl who'll make Barringer look like ten cents in that part."

The party went on and on. Still Gus did not come. She gave up looking for him. It was after three, and she was exhausted. At last she made her excuses and her farewells to the Bairds, and took her departure. No one offered to see her home. No one seemed to notice that she was leaving. Hermione and Ham Sotherington were busy in a corner talking to someone who looked influential and important; Hermione was leaning forward on her elbows listening with an unlikely amount of attention.

As she reached the entrance and stepped into the street, a taxi drove up and Gus jumped out.

"Hullo," he cried. "Going? I was just coming to look for you. Can I take you home, or will you come back with me for a bit?"

"No, take me home. I'm dead. Where have you been?" she asked him as they drove off.

"Sybil got tired, and wanted to go home. We couldn't find you to say good-bye."

"Yes, I know, but that was hours ago. Where have you been since?"

"I went back to Lowndes Street and found you'd gone. So I came on here."

"It couldn't have taken you all that time, surely. It's after three now."

"It did. You've no idea of the crush there was there."

"I told Nancy I was coming back," she said reflectively.

"I know. She told me so. I waited there for you."

She suspected suddenly that he was lying, that he had taken the cue for this from her last remark. She had an impulse to confound him by asking why, if he had

believed her to be returning to Lowndes Street, he had suggested driving her home, and then checked it, realising that she was fatigued and irritated, and her vision probably distorted. She said nothing, and he took her in his arms.

"Enjoyed yourself?" he asked, putting his face against her hair.

"Not a bit," she answered briefly. "It's been a bloody evening. I wouldn't go through it again for anything."

"Why do you feel that?"

"It's been such waste," she said. "Waste of time, and energy, and dignity, and everything. If I ever write another play, which God forbid, I shall take jolly good care to be a great many miles away on the first night. Morris Baird's been talking about my going to America for it. Like hell I will! Don't you see how silly it all is?"

"Yes, I see it. But it's fun, isn't it, all the same?"

"I suppose it could be," said Elinor, "but to-night seemed to me just damned pointless. It had no relation to anything. Those parties . . . do you realise that not one person has said a single word about the play since the curtain fell—or since it went up, for the matter of that, I expect—except to jabber about how sweet Eileen Barringer looked, and to ask me why I didn't make a speech?"

"Well, you don't expect intelligent criticism at a party, do you?"

"No, it's not that, but . . ."

"I know it's not that," he interrupted. "Give me credit for some intelligence."

"I suppose I'm taking it too seriously . . ."

"Vanity a little hurt, shall we say?"

"Good God!" She pulled herself out of his arms and sat bolt upright, staring at him in amazement. "Do you mean that?"

"Well . . ."

"Do you really think that's what I mean? That I'm hurt at not being made more fuss of? Gus, do you? Do you?"

"I don't blame you."

"But, good God, I'm not. Don't you understand? I'm not! I don't care a damn."

"Then what are you complaining of? Why does it matter, then, that nobody's mentioned the play, that it's been treated as a sort of social function?"

"It matters just this, that I've been mixed up with it . . . that I don't like being treated as a social function. Hurt vanity on that score, if you like. I feel I've been prostituted . . . stupidly . . . and that nobody even knew or realised it. Oh, I expect I'm tired and things have got out of perspective, but it all seems to me so trumpery. The whole thing, the way it was written and re-written, and rehearsed and re-rehearsed and generally slung together . . . perhaps if it had been a real play, that I'd written as a play, instead of a fabricated hotch-potch like this, then I might have hated it more, but differently. Then it *might* have been hurt vanity, because it wasn't paid attention to. But this seems to have got so far away from anything to do with me that I hate even being connected with it, because I don't feel I am, really. Besides, it's all made out of something I did so long ago that . . ." She broke off. "Oh, well, it's over, and that's the main thing."

"And it seems to have been quite a success, and ought to bring you in some money which, if it isn't the main thing, isn't exactly to be sneered at, is it?"

At the door she did not ask him to come in. He had irritated her and she wanted to be alone. He kissed her good-night and said, "I'll telephone you." And then, when he had started to go, turned back and added:

"Oh, by the way, Sybil said she was going to ring you up and ask you to tea. I hope you'll go."

She did not answer, but only smiled at him, nodding, and let herself into the flat. It was with relief that she closed her door behind her, as though she were shutting out the past evening. She felt disgruntled, having stepped out of character by participating in the proceedings, by having been induced to share, no matter how slightly, in the limelight. It all seemed a little silly and vulgar



and annoying. She felt, she thought, as she might had she drunk too much and realised, too late, that she had talked too freely. The evening seemed to have cheapened her. "Oh, well, it's over," she told herself as she got into bed. "Back to private life again."

But she slept badly, waking at half-past six with the same faint sense of being soiled, a kind of spiritual *Katzenjammer*. She tried to dismiss it, and turned her thoughts to Gus; but he, too, had failed her the night before, leaving her as he had, returning with that bright, jaunty assurance when she no longer needed him. She was certain he had lied about his movements; it would be easy enough to telephone Nancy and ask whether he had returned there, and, in her present mood of irritation, she decided to do so. She greatly resented, too, his misinterpretation of her attitude towards the evening, explaining it on the ground of wounded vanity. There were times when he seemed to have no knowledge or understanding of her at all. And yet, she realised, it was her vanity that was wounded, or rather her pride, that resented what seemed to her a kind of cheapness, as though she had made a bid for attention and importance for which she now despised herself. But Gus would not understand that; no one would understand it. It was what they were all doing, all the time. But for her to do it, for her to compete with them, was against her nature; she seemed to have offended something within herself.

She got out of bed, bathed and dressed, and walked to South Kensington station to buy the morning papers and read the notices, which, she found, were excellent. The critics spoke of "simple charm," "homely simplicity," "wholesome freshness," and one, even, of "pristine sweetness." They affected her slightly as they might have done had the play been written by someone she faintly disliked, yet for whom she felt a certain sympathy and, therefore, wished success. It seemed to have achieved it.

Mrs. Moggridge arrived with a copy of the *Daily Sketch*, saying, "Seen your picture in this morning's paper,

miss?" and Angie followed, full of interest, surprised and dismayed by Elinor's attitude, which had hardened into one of exaggerated carelessness.

"Wasn't it a success, then?" she asked. "Everybody round me seemed to like it."

"Apparently it was a huge success," Elinor replied. "The papers have all got the *vox humana* stop full out, and now we can get back to Dulcie and our work again, and forget all about it."

"I don't understand you," sighed Angie. "If I were in your place I'd be so pleased, and excited I shouldn't want to do any work for months."

"And what would the Angie do then, poor thing? No, to work, to work. Get out the last two chapters and let me have a look at them."

"I think you're wonderful," said Angie.

Elinor felt very far from wonderful, but she did no work that morning, after all. The telephone rang almost unceasingly. Everyone wanted to compare notes and hold post-mortems on Nancy's party. Nobody talked about the play, except to say that it seemed to be a great success or to criticise some article of furniture or clothing on the stage. Nancy herself begged Elinor to come to lunch and talk everything over; Winkie invited her for the afternoon; Gus sent round a large bunch of roses, at which she raised her eyebrows, seeing in them an apology, and decided not to question Nancy after all. At half-past twelve she gave Angie a sheaf of telegrams of good wishes which had arrived the night before, telling her to answer them with some nice, pretty sentiment, and not to use the same for each, and then went round to Lowndes Street for lunch.

Nancy was still in a twitter of excitement over her party; there had been five gossip-writers present, she informed Elinor. She was so glad it had been such a success; she had felt it at the party; there had been a sort of atmosphere, didn't she think?

"It was nearly five before the last people went," she told her proudly. "Lydia Walsh brought Basil Bates, the novelist. Did you see him? He was one of the very

last to leave. He's coming to lunch next Tuesday. My dear, why didn't you come back? You promised you would. Mr. Benford came back to look for you. I thought you'd taken him with you."

This was a surprise. She had been unjust to Gus.

"Where did he go? It was half-past two when he got back here. I told him you were coming back, but he wouldn't wait. He said he'd go and find you at the Bairds'. Did you see him? I do think he's rather lovely."

Elinor lost the next few remarks in a process of mental arithmetic and speculation on Gus's movements between twelve and half-past two. Nancy said that he had not waited for her; so she had caught him in a lie, after all. She felt annoyed at this but, curiously, with herself rather than with him.

From the play and the party, Nancy turned the conversation back to scandal. She gave Elinor a full description of Winkie's mother, whom she had met at Biarritz, a lady whose existence nobody had previously suspected. She appeared to be a large, round, comfortably pretty matron of fifty, with tinted hair and arms like hams, bawdy of talk, cheery and good-natured in disposition, with high-lights of violent temper, and a fondness for brandies-and-soda. She kept a lodging-house of dubious morality in Weston-super-Mare, not infrequently visited by bailiffs, and had an intimate acquaintance with the racing and music-hall world. She and Winkie had apparently alternated between chummy affection and vulgar disagreement, and she had finally left in company with a rich Lancashire hotel-keeper, whom she had picked up in the Casino.

Winkie, in the afternoon, was full of prattle, with endless stories about Nancy in Biarritz. She said little about her mother, of whom she talked as Lottie, except to say what a pal she was, and how they were much more like sisters together than mother and daughter. Elinor regretted never having been allowed to meet Lottie, who seemed a rich personality. Winkie's own news of her situation with Goronwy was that they had achieved a compromise, by which she had agreed

to have a baby, in exchange for which he would afterwards allow her to return to the stage. She talked a great deal about motherhood, and gave Elinor intimate details about the conception of the child, only remembering at the end of her recital that the occasion she was describing could not possibly have been the true one.

"If it's a boy, we're going to call him Alastair, and Dilys if it's a girl, after Goronwy's mother. He's so sweet about it. Calls me 'little mother' and 'Mam fach,' and goes about the house singing Welsh folk-songs, and after all, darling, I'm not two months gone yet, so it may be only a false alarm. But, of course, that can be put right any time. The Welsh are awfully masculine. I've given my word, and I mean to go through with it. Personally, I hope it's a boy."

"Did you say Alastair?" Elinor asked. "Why? That isn't a Welsh name."

"No, darling. It's after my little brother who died. I never remember him, but Lottie used to take me to look at his grave when I was small, and she's got a picture of him in her locket. I shan't nurse it, of course, although Goronwy thinks I ought to, but that always seems so disgusting to me, somehow. Besides, I shall have to take care of my figure. I mean to make the very most of my time. I shall have craving after craving after craving! Dressed crab, and peaches, and silk undies, and an Alsatian wolf-hound, and everything I love best. Little Winkie's going to be the spoiledest little girl in London."

Goronwy came in before Elinor left. He was a man of fifty, short and stocky, with curly black and silver hair and the face of a grumpy plough-boy. In Wales he was a strict teetotaler and something of a rip on slightly sordid lines; in London he permitted himself to drink, and lived very morally, which seemed an excellent compromise. He adored Winkie, was very proud of her, and bitterly regretted having married her.

It was past six when Elinor returned home. After the last weeks of rush and constant occupation, with the play claiming almost every moment of her time, it seemed strange to her now to have the evening free;

but, instead of relishing it, she felt, by contrast, a sense of let-down. She cooked herself a meal and ate it before the fire, re-reading the last few chapters of her present novel while she did so. Afterwards, she wandered restlessly about the room, unable to find anything to occupy her. There was too much; a pile of recent novels and biographies to read, but so many that she could not decide on which to begin; letters awaiting answers; a dozen oddments to be attended to. Her life, always crowded, had at least had some sort of habit in its disorder until recently, when its added demands had resulted in a mere chaotic shelving of everything. She vowed now, as she moved irritably about, turning away from this and that, that it must not happen again; she disliked having been thrown out of her stride like this.

She must take hold of herself; the whole thing, though pleasurable, had been a disruption, leading her to a kind of life where she did not belong, a life designed round her in a new position—a position, she felt, of spurious importance. Even Gus, it seemed, had let her down; but in asking anything of him, even reliability, she was making another demand for herself, relaxing her standard of self-sufficiency, and therefore wrong. She felt as though she had been walking on quicksands; she must return to the ground she knew.

It was in this mood that she sat down now to her desk, picked up the pile of letters and set herself to answer them; letters from all manner of people and places; letters about her books, begging letters, casual letters, almost all of them asking some service or effort from her. She put the play and all its attendant circumstance behind her, and, with a sense of loneliness and yet of freedom, filled and addressed twelve envelopes before she went to bed.

## X

BUT Gus telephoned the next morning to make arrangements for the week-end, and Lady Sybil rang up and secured her for tea, and the morning's post had a generally pleasant and flattering appearance about it, so that it was easy for her to relapse to the feeling of the past weeks and to regard the irritation of the previous evening as a mood only, induced by a temporary cessation of activity and a prolonged strain on her vitality. Yet it was with misgiving that she went down to Morris Baird's office, allowed herself to be interviewed, and visited the play that evening; her own work seemed to be calling her, and she had, too, a sense of foreboding and a remote, unreasoned consciousness of guilt, which she could ill define. It took shape merely as a feeling that she was going against her instincts.

Her tea with Sybil Trask was pleasanter than she had anticipated, although she was obliged to listen to her hostess's poems read aloud, and to answer a number of questions about her own methods of work. But she found her charming, if a little gushing; she was simple and unaffected, and her literary yearnings seemed a pathetic attempt to assert her individuality and to deny her position, which rendered her discontented. When she said that she would be far happier as a five-pound-a-week journalist or reporter, Elinor found herself believing it as she would have believed the statement from almost no other woman of Lady Sybil's means. She was sincerely striving to express herself, and what made it sad was that she had so little, beyond a genuinely likeable and affectionate nature, to express.

On the Friday Gus arrived with a hired car, and they set off together, spending that night at Lyndhurst in the New Forest. It was May and perfect weather, the

country riotous with spring. The forest was quiet, cool and sweet-scented at night as they strolled in it, peacefully, before going to bed. In the morning they drove through it after rain, the good smell of the earth and the young shrill green of the beeches clamorous in their urgency. They passed the next night at Lyme Regis, with memories of Jane Austen. In the morning they went for a walk and looked at the Cobb, and Elinor bought toffee and bulls'-eyes at a little sweetshop with bulging windows.

"I like this place," said Gus. "It's almost the only one of its kind that doesn't seem self-conscious about its quaintness. Have you ever been to Clovelly?"

"Oh, God, yes," said Elinor. "It's like the heroine of an old-world film, swinging a sunbonnet by the strings and peeping through branches of apple-blossom. And Rye; I expect it's all wrong of me, but I hate Rye."

"Me, too," joined Gus. "I once took an American there, and instead of being impressed, as I'd expected, by the Ye Olde Tea-Shoppey atmosphere of the place, he just said: 'Christ, how quaint!'"

"That's Rye," laughed Elinor. "I always feel the cars there ought all to be Austin Sevens and have leaded wind-shields and half-timbered sides. And what about Broadway? What a trio!" She began to sing:

" Clovelly and Broadway and Rye,  
All give me a pain in the eye."

And Gus joined in:

" And Broadway and Rye and Clovelly,  
All give me a pain in the belly."

They laughed a great deal, and were very happy and very silly.

They drove on, in hot sunshine, through the bland loveliness of Dorset into Devonshire, which seemed positively to be showing off in its luxuriance, and laughed with each other in a competition for hackneyed adjectives to describe it: lush, leafy, sylvan, bosky and umbrageous.

"I hardly dare leave the car outside while we have

tea," Gus remarked. "It'll be all covered with moss and wild roses when we come back."

It being Whitsun, all the larger resorts were full, but they found an hotel in Totnes for the Sunday night, simple, pleasant, and clean. After dinner they walked quietly along the path beside the Dart, and sat together, watching it, while the evening deepened around them.

"Home to-morrow?" Gus asked.

"Oh, I don't want to," she murmured plaintively. "I'm loving all this so. The country, and the sun, and these evenings, and knowing that there isn't a single soul who knows where I am, or can get me by telephone. It's a blessed holiday. I don't want to go back. Let's stay one more day—go back on Tuesday. The roads will be emptier then, too. Can you? I oughtn't to, but I will if you will."

"Yes, let's," said Gus. "Let's leave the car and spend the day walking, lie in the fields, shall we?"

"Yes, oh yes. Lovely! Let's be hot and lazy, and think about London and how nice it is not to be there."

They walked back in a still, breathing moonlight, the air warm and gentle and the trees deep and velvety.

She awoke early in the morning, with the sunshine coming through the windows, and lay for a long time happily wide-awake, with a great sense of physical well-being. These three days had rested her, given her back perspective and contentment. Gus, she knew, was still asleep in the adjoining room, and presently she rose, dressed and went out alone, walking without a hat along the path that they had walked the night before, the grass still wet with a deep dew, the sky cloudless, and everything young and fresh with the spring morning, the water glittering in the sunlight. She felt very happy.

She breakfasted alone and heartily. Gus was a lazy riser, and it was past eleven when they set out together, taking with them sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs and beer in a picnic basket that he carried, climbing a hill, walking through woods and finding late violets, until at last they came to rest on a high grassy slope where they could see the river shining below them. The day



was very hot, and the fields around them were bright with buttercups. They lay sprawling on the hill together, rejoicing in the sun upon their faces, and talked idly and ate their food, and then suddenly Gus said:

"By the way, how did you get on with Sybil?"

He was not looking at her as he spoke, and she thought that she detected a kind of shadow in his voice, which puzzled her.

"Did you like her?" he asked.

"Yes, very much. She's a sweet."

"I'm glad." There was a tiny pause, and then he said, "She and I may be getting married, I think."

There was a silence. Elinor sat quite still, with her sandwich suspended half-way to her mouth.

"Do you mind saying that again?" she asked.

He said it again, looking at her this time, with a kind of tentative, ingratiating smile. But she had heard him properly the first time; his meaning had gone straight home to her, and she had realised, curiously, that it was somehow not a complete surprise to her. When he said it again it seemed to mean less.

"I see," she said quietly, and bit her sandwich. Something jumped to her mind. "Did you fix this up after the play on Tuesday?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact we did. How did you know?"

She shrugged her shoulders. There was another silence.

"Well?" said Gus, and slid his hand along the grass towards her.

"I congratulate you. Is it going to be soon?"

"No, not soon. Nothing's really definite yet."

"And you've kept this from me the whole weekend!" She found anger rising, violent anger, getting in front of her eyes and blinding her. "You've waited till now to tell me! Why now? Why not to-morrow? We've still got another night!"

"If you're going to talk like that . . ." he began.

"If I'm going to talk like that!" she stormed, turning on him furiously. "How else? How else *can* I talk to

you? You've known this for nearly a week now, and you've kept it, you've waited. You've let me go and see her. Does she know about us?" she asked, with sudden horror at the thought.

"No, of course not."

"Yet you let me go; you asked me to go."

"She wanted to see you. She likes you. You seem to like her. Why shouldn't you be friends?"

"Why? Why?" She stopped in amazement, staring at him. "And then you come away with me, knowing this, keeping it up your sleeve, keeping it till to-day. It's vile, contemptible! And to her—what can you think of her to do it?"

"Elinor, you don't understand." He laid a hand on her arm.

"No." She pulled away from him violently, staring down at the river which she did not see.

"Listen. This need make no difference . . . to us."

"What?" She turned on him again. "What did you say?"

"Listen," he begged. "You're being melodramatic and absurd. You must let me speak."

"Well?" she said sharply.

"You don't understand. I'm very fond of Sybil. I've known her for a long time. But this is going to make no difference."

"Do you mean she's been your mistress, too?"

"No," he said angrily. "Of course not."

"I don't see why not . . . after this," she said bitterly.

"Don't say things like that. They're cruel and stupid."

"What do you mean, then, that it makes no difference?"

"Just that. Sybil and I aren't a blushing pair of innocents going into matrimony. We've each had our own lives . . . we shall continue to do so."

"Infidelity agreed on in advance? What fun!"

"Oh, you can twist it to sound beastly, if you like. I don't mean that, but we're not children. This isn't the usual sort of love-match . . ."

"Apparently not. Don't go on, Gus, unless you want to make me despise you utterly."

"Oh, very well."

"How can you talk like that? Have you no loyalty, no decency in you anywhere?"

He made a last effort.

"Elinor, you're being ridiculous. Perhaps I should have told you earlier, but I was afraid—afraid of what you'd say. I wanted this week-end. It's been happy, hasn't it? Well, then . . ." She seemed to have turned to marble, but he went on: "This marriage, if it comes off . . . I admire Sybil, I'm very fond of her, but there's never been any pretence of a grand passion. Affection, respect, but those are things that can be shared . . ."

"It's an arrangement, then? A bargain on terms?"

"No, not that."

"What then? Either you've worked it out in advance, allowing each other full liberty, made a bargain of it, or else you're deceiving her."

"No. She understands. She's not a child."

"If she knew about this week-end, would she understand that, do you think?"

"I hope so."

"You hope a lot! What do you mean by 'understand'? Have you made love to her? If it's not an arrangement, then you must have. Have you?"

He winced at this.

"That's a question you've no right to ask me."

"Why not?"

"It isn't fair."

"Fair? Fair? You talk of fair? You *have* made love to her, then, and you expect me to believe she'd 'understand.' What about me? Do *I* understand? An arrangement, an agreement, yes; I despise it, or, rather, I revolt from it, but at least it's honest. But this . . . this . . . it's cheating, treachery."

"What a good vocabulary you've got."

"Now you're getting angry! Good! I'd rather."

"I give you my word . . ." he began again; but she cut him short.

"No, I don't want to hear. There's no more to be said. Sybil may understand. I don't."

There was a long silence. She sat staring ahead of her, anger and contempt fighting within her, her violence dying down, replaced by disgust and bitterness. He crept beside her and put his arms round her.

"Elinor . . ." he said, and his voice was lover-like. She removed herself from his embrace, very quietly, and looked at him with a little frozen smile, gently shaking her head.

"Miss Johnson is a sorry fornicator, Mr. Benford," she said.

He stared back at her, and then shrugged his shoulders, realising his dismissal.

"Very well," he said again.

She rose.

"We'd better get back," she said. "I'm going home by train."

"There's no necessity for that."

"I'm going home by train," she repeated.

"As you please."

On the way back she talked to him brightly of unimportant things, forcing a random and quite irrelevant gaiety, but as they neared the hotel he made a last effort.

"Elinor, don't take it like this," he said, beggingly.

"I don't want to talk about it, Gus," she answered, quietly. "I've said all I have to say."

He accepted it.

At the hotel she went to the office and asked for a time-table, and then to her room, where she did her packing. She did not think. Her speech to him recurred over and over in her head: "Miss Johnson is a sorry fornicator, Mr. Benford." Presently she came downstairs, and found him sitting in the lounge. He rose when he saw her.

"I've ordered you some tea," he said.

"Thank you," she smiled at him.

A waitress brought the tea and they had it in silence. He took her to the station in the car. She bought her-

own ticket and he made no attempt to stop her, realising she would not let him, and that it would only involve another scene. There were fifteen minutes before her train left.

"Don't wait, please," she asked him, and held out her hand. "Good-bye."

"I shall see you again?" he queried.

"I shouldn't think so."

"Please."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Go now," she said.

He looked at her. "Good-bye, then."

"Good-bye."

He turned and went back to the car. She began walking up and down the platform. Presently the train came in. It was crowded, and she had a third-class ticket. The money in her bag had been insufficient for a first.

All the way up to London, in a compartment containing six other people, she found that she could not think. In her heart was resentment, mingled with satisfaction, and a pride at the clean-cut manner in which the affair had terminated. "Well, that's over," she said to herself, with a sort of jaunty, high bravado. "Back to the old life, and thank God for it!" Was it a foreshadowing of this break that had inspired her mood the evening after her play—a sort of prescience, unaware, that had moved her to her sense that the end was approaching? And had the last few days been but the final rallying, as a sudden brief regained vitality is sometimes the immediate precursor of death? Well, her snatched interlude of pleasure was over and she felt somehow curiously content, like one who returns from a long agreeable holiday to a not uncongenial routine. She was remotely aware that this mood would not last, that later she would feel the pain of it, the pain of betrayal and of a destroyed illusion, but for the present it was as though she were preserved from all sensation by some local anæsthetic. "Good-bye, Gus," rang in her head, and it had a pleasant sound.

She sat staring out of the window for a long while; then she got her bag down from the rack and searched in it for something to read, but all that she had with her was a novel translated from the German, written in chipped and disconnected prose, an over-contrived and conscientiously deplorable story of poverty and hunger in a war-time village. She had already read some forty pages, but, when she opened the book at the place where she had left it, her memory failed her. She could not remember who the characters were; they were gaunt and starved and bearded to a man, their bones all but pushing through the skin, the women hollow-eyed and listless, and mostly pregnant. She began again at the beginning, but her attention wandered; the author's painstaking determination in misery, his consciousness of being engaged on a masterpiece, his triumphantly successful efforts to avoid mentioning which character was speaking, or whether the events described were real or existing only in the famine-haunted imagination of his people, and the little isolated scraps of spuriously simple domestic observation, planted on the page with an air of smug satisfaction at their intense realism, rather as though they were crumbs publicly thrown to the robins on a frosty day, all finally infuriated her and broke down her attempts at concentration. She closed the book angrily, and resumed her window-gazing.

She did not hear from Gus for two days, during which the anæsthetic had had time to wear off, and she was beginning to be conscious of a dull sickness in her heart. On the third day he wrote, a long and carefully phrased letter, full of guarded accusations of injustice and intolerance, sensitively worded, with generous hints of forgiveness masquerading under cloaks of a desire for a better understanding of each other.

"Has our association been so wholly without value, has it left so few memories of happiness and pleasure, have you so little appreciation of what I have sought to give you in the way of comradeship and understanding . . ."

"Pah!" Elinor threw the letter aside in disgust,

picked it up, looked at it again and then tore it into pieces. But it nagged her from the wastepaper basket, and she found herself fitting the scraps together so that she might answer it. She drafted four or five replies, but in none of them could she escape a note either of bitterness, reproach, or self-justification, hard as she sought to keep them out of her sentences and to make her letter judicial and impartial. She found in herself a keen desire to wound him, to stab him in his pride and his conceit; she knew his weaknesses and his vanities well enough, she discovered, to be aware of the exact spots in which he would be most vulnerable. A dozen taunts seemed to lie ready to her pen; there were a dozen accusations she could level against him; a dozen petty dishonesties at which she could hint askance, without seeming to charge him with them. They stole into each reply she wrote, or, when she omitted them, they seemed to creep stealthily into the background and peer through the formality of her phrases, like evil faces peering through foliage; her pen ran away with her, leading her into chill, caustic abuse, cheap sneers and righteous self-exculpation. In each case, much as she longed to send the letter, her self-respect restrained her, causing her to try again. It was unworthy that she should justify herself, cheapening for her to stoop to malice, degrading that she should find herself seeking for veiled phrases whose *double entendre* would have meaning for him alone. She passed a whole evening fighting herself on this, arguing with herself, examining her pride, striving to convince herself that it was false pride, until in the end she flung the last draft, together with the fragments of his letter, into the basket, and went to bed wounded and impotent, to lie awake rehearsing again and again all that her injured self would like to say to him, rose again and wrote yet another letter to relieve her feelings, kept it until the morning, and then, on re-reading, destroyed it, and the sickening treadmill in her brain began once more.

It endured for weeks. Daily her resentment grew

stronger. He did not write to her again, but two weeks later she read the announcement of his engagement in the *Times*, and felt herself impelled to sit down and write her congratulations to Lady Sybil. The more she reflected on the betrothal, the more she became convinced that it was inspired only by mercenary motives on Gus's part, the attraction of money and position and a titled wife. Whether Lady Sybil cared for him, or what her motive in accepting him had been, Elinor did not know. She suspected that she loved him, that he had used his powers of fascination, his gift for flattery, to win her; she had seemed too simple, too honest a woman to marry for worldly motives, even should there be any, which Elinor, in this case, could not conceive. She found herself pitying Lady Sybil, but her own hurt was not diminished.

She was angry that she should be so hurt, angry that she should have exposed herself to it, and angry with the law, psychological or physiological, which gives a sense of humiliation to the woman who is cheated in a sex-relation greater than to the man. All of her erstwhile bravado in the joy of sharp severance had left her; she felt only cheapened and bruised and contemptuous of her own emotions, of her own suffering.

When she looked back over the past months she disliked the vision of herself moving through them; all the distaste that had come to her at the parties on the night of her play returned now, doubled in intensity. The memory of the way in which she had yielded herself to the amusement of life from her first meeting with Gus, letting slide her work and the routine of her existence that she might play awhile with him and with the theatre, irked her more than ever now that he had let her down, giving her once again the sense of a soiled dignity. Her vision was blurred, but she hated herself. She was dominated by a bitter, dulled anger and self-contempt.

A week later Hermione invited her to dinner. Ham Sotherington was coming, she said, and she had invited Gus and Lady Sybil; the latter was a great friend of



Ham's. Elinor's immediate instinct was to refuse, but almost simultaneously she realised that continued refusal was going to be impossible without explanations she had no desire to give. She did not believe that anyone knew of her relations with Gus, but it was probable that many people suspected them, and she was not anxious to provide any grounds on which these suspicions might grow, so she accepted.

Nancy also invited her to meet them, having herself asked them both to lunch on the strength of their presence at her party. Elinor suspected that Gus had only accepted, or been persuaded by Lady Sybil to accept, out of spite to her. She found herself admitting suddenly to a meanness in his nature which never before would she have faced; it was as though all the grievances and resentments against him that she had suppressed, all the frets that she had wilfully pushed to the back of her mind, during the time that they were lovers, had now become released and had revealed themselves in sum to her as the true measure of his character. The realisation shocked her so profoundly that she had to review the whole of their relationship, force herself to remember his frequent delightfulness, to maintain any sense of balance in her judgment of him, and it was a process that she did not find pleasant.

Nancy's lunch she was able to refuse, truthfully, on the ground of another engagement, but it was with great misgiving and a sense of panic inside her that she went to Hermione's. The evening passed off better than she had expected. She arrived early on purpose, so that she might not have to make an entrance, but would be already established for his arrival. She greeted him pleasantly enough, and he gave her one of his gay, engaging smiles. The extra member of the party was Norman Clifford, stiff and wooden, and looking, as he always did, as though his clothes hurt him. Hermione was making much of him these days, on a campaign of seduction to win his allegiance from Betsy, and she encouraged him to talk at dinner, knowing that nothing gave him greater pleasure. He held forth, solemnly, on

the history of Ballet to Lady Sybil, who listened with her eyebrows raised in a sort of faintly surprised deference. Once, during the recital, Elinor caught Gus's eye, and saw a glint in it that went with the faintest twitching of his mouth, and touched her to a swift desire to giggle. For one moment they achieved something of their former interchange of mood; the next, and it was interrupted by the removal of plates. She did not look at him again, and for the rest of the evening felt that instant of sympathy and shared amusement more keenly than anything that had occurred since their last meeting. It made her miss him acutely, caused her to realise how greatly she had appreciated him, and stabbed her afresh with the realisation that all of that now was over.

Lady Sybil was very charming to her, thanking her for her note, begging her to come and see her. "I would so like to think that we were friends," she said. Elinor noticed that Gus overheard this remark, but he gave no sign beyond a pleasant smile of acquiescence. His poise throughout the evening was superb; her own behaviour, she felt, was lacking in its usual spontaneity, her gaiety forced and faintly hysterical. No one appeared to notice this, but she was certain that it did not escape Gus, and that annoyed her and drove her on to further factitious efforts. She replied agreeably, but indefinitely, to Lady Sybil, reflecting that Gus would, in all probability, see to it that they met infrequently, unless he proposed encouraging the friendship to embarrass her. Again she found herself crediting him with ignoble motives, and set sick at heart that she should do so.

At last the evening ended, Gus and Lady Sybil leaving before she did. When they were gone, she begged Hermione for a long drink before going home, and settled down to an almost too fluent, released stream of chatter over a whisky-and-soda. But she experienced a sense of relief when she got home, as of a dangerous and unpleasant experience safely passed. And that night she destroyed his letters and slept better than she had done since their parting, feeling a new confidence in herself. It was over a year before she saw him again.

## XI

BUT for all that, her hurt remained, and as May and June went on, she found herself disliking London considerably. It was harder than she had expected to get back to her work, to pick up her book again after nearly three months away from it. She missed Gus acutely, having grown accustomed to his companionship; there was so much in the way of minor jokes and daily incident which she knew would have amused him, which she wanted to share with him. She wanted his company at the theatre; she missed his letters in the post, his voice on the telephone. She felt it fortunate now that they had mixed so little with each other's friends, so that she was spared the frequent mention of his name by people who would not know of their separation; although Hermione, with an unfortunate and, in this case, quite unconscious instinct for always saying and doing the wrong thing, seemed to lose no opportunity to talk of him whenever she met Elinor, speaking of "Gus" and "Sybil," with an ostentatiously careless use of the Christian names, parading her intimacy with them, which seemed to be growing apace. With her it was always "that darling Gus" or "that angel Sybil"; she never ceased telling Elinor how much she liked them. They appeared to be living in each other's pockets, although Elinor, knowing Hermione, suspected exaggeration, the wish fathering the half-truth, in her statements. All the same, it made her uncomfortable.

She threw herself eagerly, as an occupation, into the arrangement of Roly's exhibition, which had been postponed and took place in the middle of June. She saw a lot of him during the preparations, and they had friendly lunches and teas together, talking in lengthy reminiscence, without bitterness, and manifesting

a genuine interest in each other's work and life. Roly had not married again; he lived with a succession, and sometimes a simultaneity of mistresses in a studio-flat in the Fulham Road, and went abroad to paint for four or five months in every year. He still drank a great deal, but it appeared to have little effect on his health or his work. His pictures were admirable, and the show was a large success. In appearance Roly had developed, rather than changed; his ruddy complexion had become florid, with a faint suggestion of purple, and his hair was smudged with grey. He took small care of himself; his teeth were badly discoloured, his fingers stained a dark orange with nicotine, and his clothes, loose and tweedy, covered with spots, but he still retained about him the jolly, bullet-headed, snub-nosed comicality he had had when she first knew him. They were very friendly now, not unlike brother and sister. He called her "Old Girl," and admired her; and she, on her side, felt a curious affection for him.

But when his show was over, and the gallery preparing to close for the summer, while Belinda went off to a "Nature Cure" conference somewhere in Scandinavia, which Elinor visualised and described as a gathering of men and women dressed either in Jaeger or in *puris*, sitting round a table sorting vitamins into piles labelled A, B, C and D, she found London again unbearable. She decided to leave it and go down to the cottage on the South Coast, where she might be able to get back to work. Before she went, she gave a couple of lunches, working off arrears of unreturned hospitality. To one of these, a hen-party, she invited Lady Sybil. Gus's marriage was fixed for August, and she had received an invitation. She sent them, as a present, an extremely beautiful antique tortoise-shell casket—finding a pleasure, that was like biting on an aching tooth, in doing so.

A week before her departure, which was at the end of June, she received a note which surprised her. It was signed "Marjorie Morrison," and there was a half-second's gap in her memory before she connected the

name—at which she looked first, not recognising the writing—with the girl whom Richard had brought to tea.

“Dear Miss Johnson [she wrote], I don’t know whether you will remember my having come to tea at your flat with Mr. Gilchrist after a Queen’s Hall concert, on a Saturday afternoon about two months ago. I shouldn’t have thought you would, but Mr. Gilchrist has told me what a wonderful memory you have for anybody you’ve ever met, so I’m risking it.

“The point of this letter is to ask if I may come and see you. If you are too busy, please don’t mind saying so, or just leave this unanswered, and I shall quite understand. But if you could spare me a few minutes I should be most grateful. I can come any day after half-past six, or any Saturday afternoon.

“With apologies for troubling you.—Yours sincerely,  
“Marjorie Morrison.”

She wrote on plain white notepaper, with the address of Oliphant’s publishing house written in ink at the head. Her handwriting was large and round and very legible. Elinor scribbled a reply, asking her to tea on the following Saturday. She did not trouble to wonder what she wanted; she was too accustomed to people asking to be allowed to come and talk to her.

On the Friday afternoon, Cynthia came in to see her, vaguely chilly, explaining that she had been to tea somewhere in the neighbourhood. She told her that Brenda was ill; she had been going about, looking pale and drawn, for a long while, and at lunch that day had told Cynthia that she was about to undergo an operation. She was to go into a nursing-home the following week.

“What’s the trouble?” Elinor asked.

“She didn’t say,” replied Cynthia, drawing her finger along the top of Elinor’s desk and regarding the dust with distaste. “She was very vague about it, but I gathered that they suspected a tumour. She didn’t say much, anyway. I had a party, and it was just as she was going.”

"Does Richard know?"

"My dear, don't ask me. I don't see him." She turned the conversation to other things, saying what a pity she thought it, and how everyone agreed with her, that Elinor should choose to leave London just at this moment when she had a success with the play, and ought to be capitalising it.

"It's so like you, Elinor," she complained. Elinor shrugged her shoulders and tried to explain that she had other work to do, and no desire to become a social figure.

"You always seem to do everything at the wrong time," Cynthia answered. "Here's your moment, and you won't take it. Hermione was saying the same thing only yesterday. What's the good of success if you won't make use of it? You really are quite hopeless sometimes." She continued in this strain for a while, and then left.

Elinor debated for a long time whether she should pass this news of Brenda on to Richard. She felt it only fair that he should know, and finally resolved to write to him. Being busy that evening, she left it until the next morning, which was Saturday, when she sent him a note, telling him briefly what she had heard. She posted it before lunch, calculating that it should reach him the same evening.

Marjorie Morrison arrived at four o'clock—the time for which she had been invited—so punctually that Elinor suspected she must have been walking up and down outside, waiting for the hour to strike. She was wearing a light blue summer frock and a large straw hat, and carried a novel, with a Boots' library label and a Park Chair-ticket marking her place in it, under her arm.

She talked of unimportant things for a long while, of the Victoria and Albert Museum, where she had passed an hour that afternoon; of the weather, and the flowers in the Park. She said that she had been sitting reading there before going to the Museum. Elinor asked what the book was, and she said it was one of Compton Mackenzie's. Then they talked of books, and she said

that she thought *Sinister Street* grubby. She disliked novels about sex; she did not want to read about things like that.

Elinor realised that all this was but marking time, and that, behind it, lay something which the girl found hard to bring herself to say. She busied herself with the tea-things, eating slowly, smiling, and following the talk encouragingly. Presently they finished tea, and she called for Mrs. Moggridge to remove the wheeled wagonette on which it was served, telling her she might go home as soon as she had washed up. Then she rose, fetched a cigarette-box from her desk and offered it to the girl, who took one. Elinor took up a position before the empty fireplace, leaning her elbow on the mantelpiece, and stood there smiling down at her. There was a very long pause, while the girl sat smoking in quick, short puffs, leaning forward and staring before her, obviously rehearsing some sentence in her mind. Then suddenly she pulled herself together, stabbed out the cigarette in an ash-tray, sat up and spoke.

"Miss Johnson," she said, "may I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Did you ever say anything to Mr. Gilchrist about me?"

"I?"

"Yes. Did you?"

"What about you?"

"Anything. I want to know. You went out with him that Saturday evening. Did you talk to him about me?"

"We spoke about you. Yes."

"Did you tell him to talk to me?"

"What about?"

"About his wife."

Elinor was standing upright now, with her hands behind her. Her face was grave.

"Yes, I did," she said.

"Why did you? What made you?"

"I thought you were fond of him," she said quietly.  
"I thought you ought to know."

"What made you think I was fond of him?" The girl's voice was toneless.

"I could see it. At least, I thought I could. Was I right?"

The girl nodded.

"I thought you had spoken to him," she said. "He kept away for two days."

"And then he told you?"

"I told him. Or, rather, I made him tell me. I knew he was going to. I wanted to get in first, so I asked him."

"And then?" There was no reply. "Do you think I was interfering?" The girl shook her head. "Why do you ask me all this?"

"I wanted to know." She spoke without looking at Elinor, hunched forward, her eyes fixed on the red brick of the fireplace. "I thought it was you. I supposed you'd guessed what I felt. I suppose another woman can always see."

"You're in love with him." It was scarcely a question.

"And you told him so," the girl said.

"I thought he knew," Elinor replied. The girl smiled faintly. "I'm sorry."

"You needn't be. That doesn't matter."

There was another silence. Elinor suddenly abandoned her attitude of waiting.

"What then? Do you want to talk about it?" she asked kindly, stressing the word "want."

"Please. May I?"

"Of course." She went back to her own chair beside her, sitting down, as a sort of signal for confidence.

"I don't know what you'll think of me, coming here like this, talking like this, bothering you, but I must talk to someone. And you're his friend, you understand him, you're fond of him. He's fond of you, too; fonder of you than anybody, except his wife, I think. That's why I came to you . . . that, and because I thought you knew . . . about me."

Elinor nodded gravely and said nothing. She let the girl go on.

"Well, he told me the next week. We had dinner



together, and I behaved . . . very badly. I didn't mean to, but . . . I cried, and . . . well, anyway, that doesn't matter. I didn't think I'd ever see him again. I meant not to, but I did. I don't know why. I told myself it was because I thought he wanted me, because he was unhappy, and perhaps I could help him. It wasn't that; at least, I don't think it was. It was just because I wanted to. You see, I'm not very happy at home . . . my parents are . . . well, rather awful, really. Oh, I'm fond of them, but . . . well, we don't really get on. We're always having trouble; and then I lose my temper and say things I'm sorry for. Anyway, it's not much fun, and knowing him had been . . . well, it had made everything different. I couldn't go back. I suppose I *had* thought about . . . marrying him. I don't know. I don't think I cared. I was just . . . in love with him; you saw that, that day. I heard he was married, from one of the girls in the office, and I thought perhaps he was divorced from his wife, or going to be, or that he didn't get on with her. That didn't matter so much. I don't know that I'd ever really thought he'd marry me. I'd dreamed about it, I suppose, but, after all, I'm not really his sort. I know that. My father's common; I don't mean that he drops his aitches or calls my mother "Mrs. M.," but she married out of her class." Elinor winced slightly at this, but kept silent. "She was a lady, and he . . . well, he wasn't a gentleman, that's all. There's no use denying it. I suppose if I hadn't been so much in love with Richard,"—the name slipped out for the first time,—“and known that he wasn't with me, I shouldn't have thought of these things, but as it was, I thought of them all the time. It got worse and worse. So, when I heard he was married, it didn't really seem to matter so much. I thought I'd go to him without that, if he wanted me. Oh, I suppose that sounds awful, but it's true. Only he didn't want me; at least, I think he didn't think it fair to me. I had to conquer that.”

She covered her face with her hands at this, as though to shut out a humiliating memory. When she removed

them, she was crying. But she swallowed tears, and went on.

"I gave myself to him. I begged him to let me be his mistress. It was the night of your play. We went to it together, and his wife was there, and he overheard something someone said about her and the man she was with. It upset him horribly. I went home with him after the theatre, and I could see that he was miserable. I made him talk, I made him talk about her. I knew I was missing my last train home, but I was glad, and I made him talk, and I talked to him, so that he shouldn't realise it. I stood in front of the clock. I thought it might make him happier to talk, too—to tell me about it; but it only made him break down, it made him cry. I'd never seen him cry before. When he did, it sort of . . . turned me to water. I'd have done anything to stop him. I told him I'd do anything. I begged him to let me stay with him that night."

She ceased. She had obviously braced herself beforehand with a resolution to tell everything and not to spare herself—the detail of the clock showed that—but for a moment now she could not go on. Elinor remained quite still, waiting. Her heart was full of sympathy and understanding, but it seemed best not to speak. Presently the girl continued:

"Well, I stayed. I think he was glad of me. I don't say that by way of conceit, but I think he was. I think he was glad to have someone with him. I stayed all night, and went straight to the office in the morning. I was in evening-dress; I had to buy a day-frock. I told them at home I'd missed my train and put up with another girl. I don't think Dad believed me, but that didn't matter. We'd hardly spoken for weeks, anyway. Well, it's gone on since then, half a dozen times. I don't regret it. I'm glad of it."

"I'm glad, too." Elinor spoke for the first time.

"Are you?" She looked up at her, gratefully. "Why?"

"Because it's what you wanted. You loved him. And because I'm glad to think that he has someone who does."

"But he wants *her*," the girl said, bitterly, "his wife. He can't forget her. I can't make him. All the time he's thinking of her. He tries not to let me see it; he's sweet to me, but I know. Do you know her?"

"Brenda? Yes, I know her."

"What's the matter with her? Why is she so cruel to him? What's she like?"

"She isn't cruel. She just doesn't love him; she can't, and he made himself a nuisance about it, and she got angry. That's all. I'm terribly sorry for Richard."

"What's she like?" the girl repeated. "Why can't she love him? It seems so incredible. He's the dearest person that ever was. Why can't she love him? I'd let him go in a moment if she would."

"She's not made that way. His gentleness doesn't touch her. She's one of those women who want brutality. Have you ever looked at Richard's hands, or eyes? But of course you have. They're gentle, they belong to an artist. What Brenda wants is a prize-fighter. She's so fastidious in everything else, that in matters of sex she turns to coarseness."

"How disgusting! I didn't know there *were* women like that. And for Richard, of all men! What can one do about it?"

"Nothing."

"But I can't bear to see him like this. If I thought I loved him before, I love him a hundred times more now—now that I've given myself to him." Elinor checked a momentary irritation at the recurrence of this phrase, a euphemism drawn from sentimental literature, which annoyed her. "I'd kill myself willingly if I thought it would do him any good. But I can't get near him. I'm outside, all the time. There are times when I almost think he doesn't know I'm there."

"Poor kid!" said Elinor.

"What can I do?" she pleaded. "I'm getting my holidays next month. I asked for them early, because I thought I was going with a friend, but . . ." She stopped again.

"You're going with him?"

"I don't know. I want to—I want to more than anything else in the world, but I'm afraid."

"What of?"

"Oh, not of having a baby, or anything like that, but I'm afraid of losing him, afraid of boring him. I do bore him, I know. I'm not clever enough for him, and if he's with me all day and every day for a whole fortnight . . ."

"I shouldn't worry about that. I don't think you bore him."

"It isn't that he doesn't love me. I know that—I've known it from the beginning. I suppose, in a way, I know what *he* feels about *her* . . . but it isn't that. I'm grateful if he'll let *me* love *him* . . . I don't expect him to love *me*. I'd made up my mind that I would do it, ask him to take me away for my holidays, abroad somewhere. I've never been abroad. I'd made up my mind that I'd ask him this evening—we're going out to dinner. I said I'd have that out of life if I never have anything else; then I'd have it to remember anyway; but I'm afraid. I'm afraid of his hating it and me, of his not wanting me. He'd try not to show it, because he's kind, but I think I'd know it. I'd be watching for it."

"I should go if I were you."

"Would you?" she asked eagerly.

"He likes being with you. He told me that."

"Did he? What did he say? Won't you tell me what he said?"

"He said he liked you, that he was fond of you, that he thought you were sweet, that he was afraid for you, because he couldn't love you, but that he liked being with you, taking you out."

"Oh, if I thought so . . ." Her pleasure in these bare statements was pathetic. "But it was me who forced myself on him that way; I, rather," she corrected her grammar. "I suppose it was shameless, but I don't care about that. I've been happy."

"I think he'd like taking you abroad, especially if you've never been; showing it to you. He'd like taking you to Germany, to Munich."

"He's talked about Munich. Oh, if I thought that he'd like to take me . . . that he could bear to take me . . ." Her eyes were shining. She seemed to make a resolution, and nodded, as though to herself. "I'll ask him. I'll have that. Then, if it's a failure, I need never see him again, but I'll have had it. It would be so wonderful . . ." Her voice died, and she sat staring, bright-eyed with imagination. Then she awoke, and became suddenly self-conscious, and rose from her chair.

"I don't know how to thank you . . . for letting me talk like this. I had to talk to somebody, and I've no one, myself—no one I could tell."

"I'm very glad you did." Elinor rose too.

"I was sure you had spoken to Richard that day. It took all my courage coming, all the same. You're not shocked at what I've told you?"

"Shocked?" Elinor laughed and shook her head. "Of course I'm not shocked."

"I do love him." She said it like a child, excusing itself for some fault.

"I can see that." She put her hands on the girl's shoulders and kissed her.

"You *are* kind," she murmured. "May I come and see you again some time?"

"I wish you would."

"Really? I'd like to."

"Really."

Elinor took her to the door.

"I hope you'll have a lovely holiday," she said.

She returned to the room with a sense of having been utterly inadequate. Yet what was there more that she could have said? The whole story filled her with pity, for the impossibility of either finding any fulfilment. She had said all that she could in truth say in her brief summary of Richard's attitude, and the pleasure it had given had been pitiful. "This ghastly inequality of love," she thought, and remembered her glimpse of the girl staring at Richard's profile in the concert-hall. "This chain of profiles. The waste of love! Richard and Brenda; this kid and Richard! Drawing comfort

from scraps; kindness and gentleness! God, how bloody it all is! The whole world crying for love, crying to be loved, to be allowed to love, even. To be allowed to love! It's pathetic! The sex ramp is nothing to it; that's the body, and its demands can be met with. But this, it's a humiliation: damned souls crying out upon their loneliness. That child, it's pitiful; grateful that he lets her love him, grateful to be allowed around, to be allowed to look at him, that's all it is. And yet—God damn the truth!—in my heart I believe I envy her somewhere. There's the same bloody longing in all of us. I said it all to Richard that night he came here to talk of Brenda. I can look at it all—all this yearning and girning, and thank God that I'm outside it, and yet really I'm envious. Gus ought to have taught me, if anything could, but we never learn, and the hurt of Gus was that there was too little hurt, except to pride."

She gave herself up to a sick and angry brooding, turning over her resentment against Gus, her memories of Larry, and the faint, distant longing which, though contemptuous of it, she could not deny, the longing to be possessed by an emotion, to be dominated by another personality, to submerge herself in another human being—in her own phrase, "to be allowed to love"—a longing that was sheer emptiness of heart. It angered her in its utter unreasonableness that she should feel this envy for the girl whose plight she thought so pitiful, that she should envy her the fulfilment of that capacity for emotion which was the cause of half the world's heartbreak, and find that heartbreak somehow desirable. She felt tired and lonely and suddenly old as she turned, listlessly, to dress for a dinner to which she had no wish to go.

Richard had been spending the afternoon reading. About three o'clock the hot bright sunshine coming through his windows and the sight of blue sky awoke in him a sense of compunction at sitting indoors, so that he forced himself to take a walk, and strolled for a while in Hyde Park. He listened with a grave and fascinated

amazement to the orators, asking himself for the thousandth time how such fanaticism were possible; unable to comprehend, with his own capacity for question and for doubt, his own almost total lack of conviction, how any human being could achieve such fervour for an idea, religious or political, and lash itself to a passion that was so independent, so curiously regardless of the amused or listless crowd before it, as to be almost masturbatory. He tried to picture the home-lives of the speakers, and visualised such celibate loneliness, such isolation in a bare garret stacked with pamphlets, or such domestic tyranny in a foully married dinginess, that he turned away, shuddering. Near by, an elderly lady, white-haired and neatly dressed, plump and almost pretty, bearing all the signs of gentility, save for a sort of jolly wink in her blue eyes at the friendly jeers of her audience—a wink that reminded him somehow of Nellie Wallace—was leaning over a desk, thumping it and singing, to the tune of "God Save the King," stanzas in praise of the forces:

" God save our Men in Blue,  
They all will see us through,  
Our sailor-boys . . . "

The crowd appeared to be enjoying her performance, rallying her and cheering her on, shouting with delighted laughter at the ineptitude of some of the verses:

" God save our Policemen, too,  
Who watch by day and night,  
To keep us safe,  
Keeping the thieves at bay;  
Who are so brave as they,  
In all our London streets?  
God save the Police! "

" She's a nib, ain't she? " a man without a collar said, matily, to Richard. Presently she packed up for the afternoon, and trotted off through the Park, carrying her bundle of leaflets, looking like any respectable, well-educated lady of limited means going home to tea in her rooms in Bayswater.

Richard walked on for a little, but the companionship that he saw around him, everyone in twos and threes, girls with their young men, young men waiting for their girls, soldiers talking in little knots, or walking stolidly and silently beside women, oppressed him with a sense of loneliness. The sunshine and the trees, the couples sprawling on the short dry grass, the whole brightness of the afternoon, the commencement of a hard-earned week-end of leisure and fun to all these people, seemed to signify something in which he had no part. Saturday afternoon and Saturday night meant nothing to him; he found himself envying the common people, and hating them jealously. He felt lonelier here than in his rooms. He turned and went back to them.

After tea, which his landlady brought him, he returned to his reading of manuscripts, smoking, with a glass of whisky beside him. The window was open; the street outside was sunnily quiet. He felt at peace, like this, away from the crowd. There came a tap on the door, and then it opened, and his landlady announced: "A lady to see you, sir." He got up in surprise. He was not expecting Marjorie until seven, and his thought was that it must be Elinor, making an unexpected call. His heart almost stopped when he saw that it was Brenda.

"Brenda!" He stood quite still, staring at her. He felt faint and trembling with the shock of seeing her.

"Am I disturbing you?" she asked.

"Of course not." His throat seemed to have closed, and he found it hard to get the words out. "You want to see me?"

"Not for anything important. I've been for a walk, and it occurred to me to look in. Do you mind?"

"My dear!"

"I got your address from Nancy." She looked round her. "Furnished rooms?" she queried.

"Yes."

"Dick dear . . . Why?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"And such a messy street. I'd no idea."



"Do you care?" He said this woundingly.

"A little," she answered, and sat down. He stood looking at her.

"Are you happy?" she asked.

"Not very."

"I'm sorry," she said, and sat quite still. She was looking curiously fragile, but very lovely, her eyes large and more lustrous than he had remembered them in the dead pallor of her face.

"Why do you stare at me like that?" she asked.

"I'm sorry. You aren't looking well."

"Aren't I?"

"No. You look tired, and thinner. You've got much thinner."

"It's fashionable."

"Not to be as thin as that. Have you been starving yourself?"

"Perhaps." She spoke impatiently, and took a cigarette from a gold case in her bag, a case that he had given her, fitting it into a tortoise-shell holder that was another of his presents. The movement of her fingers and her long pale hands had a calm and an assurance that were like a pain to him. He lit a match for her, the flame thin and almost invisible in the sunlight. She sat smoking, upright in the arm-chair, not leaning back, a curious stillness about her.

"And you?" he asked. "Are you happy?"

"As happy as I ever was."

"Why have you come here?"

"To see you. If you don't want me, I'll go."

"You've nothing to say to me?"

"What should I have?"

"I don't know." He turned away from her and walked to the window, standing with his back to her, looking down into the street, empty save for two cars standing in front of houses. It was in his mind, like the faint hope of a miracle, that she had come to ask him to return to her; but he would not say it, even though he knew her pride might well refuse to let her speak.

"Won't you talk to me?" she said at last, and her

voice seemed to come from an immense distance. He turned back. "After all, we're still friends, aren't we?"

"Yes. Or enemies. What we've always been."

She ignored this.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "What are all these manuscripts? Not yours?"

He told her about his work. She seemed not to be listening, yet she asked a question each time he finished speaking.

"Are you reading anything else?" she asked.

He told her about that, too.

"You've no piano here? You miss that, surely? Why don't you get one?"

"These are temporary quarters. It didn't seem worth while."

"What are you waiting for?"

"I don't really know. I just *feel* temporary."

She nodded, and then rose and began looking at his books, a small selection, in a little stand of shelves. She took one out, a volume of Donne, and opened it, looking at it for a moment. Then she handed it to him.

"Read to me," she said.

He stared at her in surprise.

"What? What shall I read?"

"Read 'The Anniversary.'"

He returned to his chair and she to hers, where again she sat very straight and still while he read. When he came to the end of the poem, she said, "Read me something else."

He read her other poems. It all seemed curiously fantastic, the two of them in that room, he reading and she listening, with the quiet street beyond the open window, the sunshine paling with the late afternoon. He felt as though they had somehow become displaced in time, as though the world had stopped and they were left suspended, caught in nothingness among these alien surroundings, these walls and chairs and furnishings which had no relation to the two of them.

"You're not listening," he said, suddenly.

She turned her head towards him, as though in a trance.

"Yes, I am. Listening to your voice, anyway. I like you to read to me."

He went over to her chair and stood above her.

"Brenda," he said, "what is it? There's something wrong."

"No." She shook her head.

"You're really all right?"

"Of course."

"You look . . . as if you weren't there. You're like a ghost."

"Don't!" She shivered.

"You're ill. I'm sure you're ill. You never used to look like that."

"Don't!" she said again, and rose, moving away from him to the mantelpiece.

"You should see a doctor."

"I have."

"Then you *are* ill. What did he say?"

"Nothing. I'm all right. Leave me alone, Dick. I didn't come here to be questioned."

"Why then?"

"To get away." She spoke almost passionately.

"Away? How do you mean?"

"Oh, never mind," she said impatiently. "I wish you'd a piano. I'd have liked you to play to me. Read me some more. Something different this time."

"What?"

"What have you got?" She went to the shelves again. "An austere selection. Here—the Sonnets. Read me from that."

"No." He shook his head definitely.

"Why not?"

"I couldn't," he said.

She looked at him and swiftly understood. The pain and the unsatisfied longing of Shakespeare's love were too akin to his own.

"I'm sorry," she replied, and took another book from the stand. "Francis Thompson, that's impersonal enough."

He read her "The Daisy," sitting on the arm of his chair, while she stood in the window. He knew the poem almost by heart, and looked up at her, watching her, while he read. She was staring out with wide, unseeing eyes, and did not move.

"Thank you," she said, when he had finished. "I must go."

She went back to her chair for her bag and gloves, and then stood facing him.

"Good-bye, Dick," she said, and held out her hand.

"Good-bye." He took it. "There's nothing I can do?"

"Nothing." She shook her head and smiled for the first time, a slight, fleeting smile that was like a pale, reflected glance of sunlight on her face.

"I'll come downstairs with you."

In the entrance-hall some letters, addressed with his name, were lying on the hat-stand. He put them in his pocket without looking at them.

When she had gone he returned to the sitting-room, shaken and trembling. There was some whisky left in his glass. He drank it, and it tasted flat and stale. He poured out more from the decanter, and drank that, too, but he could not stop himself shaking. He picked up the volume of Donne, and opened it, staring at the pages and not seeing anything that was printed there. He was still sitting on the arm of his chair, with the book in his hands, when Marjorie arrived, and he turned to her a face so pale and anguished that she cried out.

All through dinner he seemed distraught; afterwards, he suggested their taking a 'bus to Richmond. She sat beside him on the 'bus-top, watching him covertly as they drove into the slow summer twilight, with the street-lamps shining through the trees, making a frail intricate pattern of lace and light; along main thoroughfares filled with people and music-halls, cinemas and public-houses; past long, still suburban roads, with well-kept gardens and houses of Edwardian respectability. At Richmond they walked together on the terraces, and presently came to a seat where they

rested, looking down at the river, people passing them, dark shapes in the warm blue evening. They had talked little on the 'bus, and she had not yet dared to broach her project for the summer. Something had happened to distress him; she waited for him to tell her of it. At last he spoke, not looking at her.

"Brenda came to see me this afternoon," he said.

"Your wife?" A stab of fear went through her.

"Yes."

"What did she want?"

"Nothing. That's what I don't understand. I can't think why she came."

"She didn't want you to go back to her?"

"No, I don't think so. She just came, stayed an hour and went."

"And said nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Didn't she say why she came?"

"She said she wanted to see me."

"She doesn't want you to divorce her, do you think?"

He shook his head in the darkness.

"Why then?"

"I tell you, I don't know."

"It's upset you."

"Yes."

"She shouldn't have. She should have known."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"What are you going to do?"

"Do? What is there for me to do?"

Silence fell on them. They sat for what seemed a long while, and then he said, "We'd better go back. Let's go by train."

All the way to the station, and while they were waiting on the platform, she tried to nerve herself to speak of the holiday. It was only when they were in the train, alone in a first-class carriage, that she brought herself to do so.

"They're arranging the holidays in the office," she began. "I'm getting mine next month."

"How long do you have?"

"A fortnight. The second fortnight in July."

"Have you any idea where you're going?"

"No." She could not say it. "I'd thought of the seaside . . ." And then, with a stupendous effort, she went on: "I'd like to go abroad. I've never been. Germany, or somewhere."

"Germany?" A light came into his face. "Would you let me take you?"

"Would you?" she asked, trembling.

"Why, of course. I'd love to. Oh, but that would be splendid. A fortnight, you say? That isn't much. You couldn't make it more?"

She shook her head, sadly.

"Just the extra week-end, that's all. I could get away on the Friday night."

"Supposing we went straight to Munich . . . hired a car there. We might fly, to save time. Have you ever flown? Would you like to? We could be in Munich the Saturday night, in time for the opera perhaps. Then, the week-end there; after that Salzburg . . ." He made plans, happily, all the way home, seeming almost excited about it.

He left her at Baker Street Station. They made arrangements to meet the following morning at Waterloo, take the train down into Surrey and spend the day walking. He kissed her good-night, and she clung to him for a moment, loth to leave him, wanting to stroke his cheek and his hair, to stay with her body pressed against him, desiring him passionately. But they were in a public station, and she was aware of the people round her. As it was, she felt like a housemaid saying good-night to her young man. But she sat in the train, the whole way back to Wembley Park, dizzy with happiness and the prospect of their time together in Germany, telling herself it was too good to be true.

Richard went back to his rooms, his mind divided between the thought of Munich and his memory of Brenda, but when he came into the sitting-room and saw the books, the Donne and the Francis Thompson,

lying where he had left them, the recollection of the afternoon drove all else before it. He could see nothing but Brenda, think of no one but her. He took the Shakespeare Sonnets from the shelf and began to read them, torturing himself. He drank a great deal before he went to bed. It was only then, emptying his pockets, that he found the letters he had stuffed there earlier in the afternoon. One of them was Elinor's, telling him of Brenda's illness. He read it, sitting on his bed in his shirt-sleeves, and it seemed to hit him between the eyes. His immediate thought was to telephone Brenda and speak to her, but it was past one o'clock, and he feared to disturb her if she should be asleep. Was that why she had come that afternoon? Had she wanted to tell him, and baulked at the fence, fearing perhaps to ask his pity? Had it been dread that drove her to him? Was that what she had meant by "wanting to get away"? Had she perhaps really a need for him at last? Was it possible, that now at last, in fear and illness, she might want him? If only he could go to her; now, at once, to-night. This illness; he read Elinor's letter again; what could it be? Elinor said nothing. An operation; going into a nursing-home next week: "I do not imagine it is serious, but I thought it only fair to let you know." His imagination rushed forward to thoughts of death, of illnesses he dared not name, even in his mind.

He did not sleep at all that night, and it was not until it was almost light that he thought of Marjorie and the proposed holiday. How would that be affected? He could not go away with this hanging over him. If Brenda wanted him . . . but supposing she didn't? Then why had she come? Had she perhaps had a premonition of death, and wished to see him once again? But why him? Why not her lover?

He had arranged to meet Marjorie at ten o'clock. He rose at seven, bathed and dressed, went out and walked the empty streets, with a few newspaper shops beginning to open, and placards of the *Dispatch* and the *News of the World* at the corners. He walked on to Chelsea, impelled towards their house, where he stood staring at the

windows, looking for signs of movement within. It was too early to awaken them. He paced the Embankment until nine o'clock, and then returned to the house and rang the bell. An unfamiliar maid came to the door; he was glad of this.

"Is Mrs. Gilchrist at home?" he asked.

The maid stared at him in surprise.

"Mrs. Gilchrist's away."

"Away?"

"Yes, sir."

"But I saw her yesterday."

"Mrs. Gilchrist went away last night, sir."

"Oh, I see. Do you know where she's gone?"

The maid hesitated.

"It's very important," he said. He felt he could not tell her who he was, yet if she denied him he would have to do so. He wondered what she knew of their relations; what the other servants had told her. "I'm an old friend of Mrs. Gilchrist's. I've got to see her urgently."

The maid looked worried.

"The mistress said she was going to Brighton," she told him, at length.

"Did she say when she'd be back?"

"She said to-morrow morning, sir."

"Do you know where she's staying in Brighton?"

"I'm afraid I don't, sir."

"I see. Thank you."

"Who shall I tell her called, sir?"

"You needn't bother. I'll write."

"Very good, sir."

The girl looked disturbed, as though doubtful whether she had done right in giving him the information. He turned away, and the door closed.

Brighton. Did that mean she had gone with some man? Why should Brighton always suggest an intrigue? But, if that were the case, would she have told the maid where she was going? Yet it was scarcely likely she would go alone; had she perhaps gone with some other woman? Or had she gone alone, to escape from London, as she had come to see him, unable to endure the time of



waiting? Should he go down to Brighton and search for her? Would he find her? That did not matter; anything was better than this inactivity in uncertainty. But supposing she were not alone, supposing she were with a man, then it would look as though he were spying on her. He could not help that. He had to see her. But Marjorie, what of her? He had forgotten her. Well, he must tell her, tell her that their walk must be cancelled. He could not bother to consider how.

He went to Waterloo and waited for her feverishly. She came towards him, smiling. "

"You're early," she said, looking up at the clock, which showed five minutes to ten.

"I can't come," he said.

The smile went from her face and her eyes darkened with disappointment.

"My wife's ill," he went on. "I heard last night. I've got to go and see her. I'm sorry, but . . . I've got to go."

"Of course." She spoke quietly. "Is it something serious?"

"I don't know. I've got to see her."

"Where is she?"

"At Brighton. I must get a taxi. I'm sorry, my dear."

"It's all right," she answered, and smiled at him.

"I'll get a taxi to Victoria. Can I drop you anywhere?"

She shook her head.

"Don't bother about me," she said. "

"Well, then . . ." He hesitated awkwardly. "Good-bye. I'll be in at the office to-morrow or the next day. I'm sorry about this."

"So am I . . . for you," she answered. "I hope it's . . . all right. Go along. Don't wait for me."

He left her, remembering once to look back. She was standing quite still, with her back to him, where they had parted. He took a taxi to Victoria, and breakfasted on the train.

Brighton was crowded, a slow, thick stream of people moving along the Front. He did not know how to begin

his search. He knew the town only slightly; Brenda and he had never stayed there together; he had no idea which hotel she would be likely to select. He called at the Metropole, the Grand, the Albion, the Old Ship, and some dozen others, inquiring for her by name. There was a Mrs. George Gilchrist staying at the Albion, described to him as an elderly lady with white hair, and the authorities at the desk seemed faintly annoyed that she would not do. It was two o'clock before he abandoned his round of hotels. He had a bad, hasty lunch at the last of them, and spent the afternoon walking up and down the sunny length of the Front, or sitting on one of the seats, trying to scan every figure in the press of people. By six o'clock he was hopeless and exhausted, and had seen no sign of Brenda. It had been a fool's errand. Yet still he was loth to leave, and walked once again from Hove back to the Albion Hotel in a last search for her. Then he took the train back to London.

It was after eight when he arrived. He did not know how he was going to get through the evening. He badly wanted someone to talk to, and yet knew that he would be able to talk of only one subject. His mind returned to Marjorie for the first time since he had left her at Waterloo. He wondered how she had spent the day, whether she had gone down to the country alone, and pitied her, but remotely, with a stirring of conscience for having deserted her. He wondered if Elinor would be at home; he would like to see Elinor. He telephoned her, but could get no reply. Presently he began to walk towards Hyde Park Corner, but he was tired by his trudging and searching in Brighton, so he boarded a 'bus, which took him as far as Marble Arch. There, he went into the Regal Cinema, and sat in the darkness for an hour, inattentively watching and listening to a picture about gunmen and chorus girls, fidgeting and twisting in his seat. Then he went home, looking, despite the certainty that nothing could have done so, for some note or message that had arrived in his absence. But there was nothing on the hall stand, nothing on his table, mantelpiece or desk. He found that he was hungry,

and rang for the landlady, who brought him, with grumbled apologies, some coarse, brown, cold roast beef and a messy pot of mustard pickles, and the remnant of a loaf, with a piece of Cheddar cheese, which was, she said, all that she had in the house. He ate a little of the meat and the pickles, though he disliked them, and cut off a wedge of cheese, which he munched, walking about the room. He filled a glass nearly half-way up with whisky, and found that he had run out of soda. Whisky and water was a drink he could not stomach, so he took it neat, swallowing it in large gulps, which made him feel better, and then sat down to write to Brenda. He had rehearsed the letter over and over again, sitting in the train on his way back from Brighton, but it was hard to write. He made five false starts before embarking on the one he finally posted. Even then it did not satisfy him; it seemed cold and empty, expressing his sympathy and his concern, asking whether there was nothing that he might be allowed to do for her. He made no mention of his visit to Brighton, fearing either its arousing her contempt or irritation, or that she might read it as asking for gratitude or pity for his consideration or his distress. He sought studiously to make his note as selfless as possible, remembering how often he had plagued her with self-pity in the past, knowing it as a fault and a weakness in him which had always jarred her. Besides, in the present case, his thought was all for her, or so it seemed to him. But even then he could not resist scribbling at the foot of the letter: "I wish to God you had told me yesterday." He took it himself to the post and then returned to his chair and a book, which he could not read, and, much later, to bed and a night of shallow, fretful sleep.

## XII

HE did not see her until the Thursday, when she was in the nursing-home after her operation, very frail, and looking drained and suffering, with her eyes larger than ever in her drawn, dark face. He had received a brief note from her, written an hour before she went into the operating theatre, and he had had a long interview with the doctors before they let him see her, when they told him two stories, one for his ears, and one for hers. His first visit to her lasted ten minutes; when he left he kissed her, so gently and timidly, that she smiled the remotest ghost of a smile, and said: "My dear, I'm not dead," and then, as he got to the door, added: "It was nice of you to come." He went again the next day, and the next. The doctors advised her remaining in the home a fortnight; after that she could be removed to Chelsea, but she would have to stay a long time in bed.

During these first days he saw no one but his friend Bill, to whom he told the whole story. Marjorie he felt he could not face until his suspense had been ended by some sort of knowledge. He sent her a note telling her what was happening, and received a short reply of sympathy and understanding, written in the office. On the Friday, however, after leaving Brenda, he went down to Oliphant's. She worked in a room with two other girls, and the smile that she gave him when he entered was little different from theirs. He had only a moment alone with her.

"Will you meet me at Umberto's to-morrow?" he asked.

She nodded.

"What time?" she asked.

"Half-past seven. Is that all right?"

He telephoned Elinor, but she had gone away.

She had mentioned in her letter that she would be leaving London on the Wednesday, but he had forgotten. He waited, now, to write to her until a decision had been made, which must, if possible, be made before he saw Marjorie.

He spoke of it to Brenda on the Saturday afternoon. A very faint shadow of colour was beginning to return to her face; the yellowish-brown stain which had been there on the Thursday was fading. She was lying a little higher, propped against pillows, and some little trouble had been taken with her appearance. The bed was strewn with illustrated papers, and there were a lot of flowers in the room. For the first time she asked him questions about herself, what the doctors had told him, demanding their words exactly and in detail, asking insistently, anxious to find some inconsistency of story. But he had learned his part well, said only what he had been told to say, and presently she appeared satisfied.

"Brenda dear," he said, tentatively, "there's something I want to ask you. You'll have to be in bed some time, I'm afraid. I wondered"—he looked at his fingers, playing with his ring as he said it—"would you like me to come home, come back and look after things? I'd try not to be in the way."

"Dick dear . . ." She put out a weak hand. "That's very sweet of you."

"Would you like me to?"

"Would you like to?"

There were memories between them that they could not forget, memories of his leaving. They rose up now, and seemed incredible. He felt only pity and tenderness for her.

"I should . . . if you'll have me."

"My dear, we're still married."

"Thank God!"

"Dick . . . you'll embarrass me!" He did not look up, afraid to see mockery in her face. Besides, there was something else he wanted to ask.

"Unless," he went on, "unless you've your own arrangements?"

He looked at her now, a question in his eyes. He had never told her that he knew of her adultery, but she did not appear surprised. She moved her head feebly on the pillow, as though shaking it.

"That's all over," she said.

"Then you'd like me to come?"

"I should . . . rather."

He left soon after that. He met Cynthia in the hall downstairs, and exchanged a few words with her.

"Don't stay long," he said, "she's tired."

Cynthia's car was outside the home; a Rolls Royce, with a Pekingese sitting up and looking out of the window.

He was early at Umberto's, and sat at their usual table, waiting for Marjorie, who arrived a little late.

"How are things?" was her first question.

"All right," he nodded.

"Have you seen her?"

"Yes."

"She's getting on all right?"

"I think so."

But their conversation over dinner was awkward and halting, each of them aware how much was being shelved.

"Let's go home," he said, when they left. "We'll get a taxi."

"Can't we walk a little way? I'd rather."

They walked up Dean Street and through back ways into Great Marlborough Street. The clock over Liberty's was on the stroke of nine as they passed it, and a little group had gathered to watch the figures move. They had not spoken at all since leaving the restaurant; now, at the Circus, he said, "Shall we get a taxi here?" and she assented.

Back in his rooms she took the arm-chair facing the window, and sat waiting.

"Marjorie," he said, "I've got to talk to you."

She nodded.

"I know," she answered, simply.

"It's about Brenda. She's iller than she looks."

I've talked to the doctors. They don't know . . . what they've been able to do."

"You mean, whether the operation was successful?"

"It was successful as far as it went. They can't guarantee it won't return. It was . . . you don't want details, do you?"

She shook her head in silence.

"Well, that's how it is. They're going to try treatment later on—radium, and . . . She'll get better from this, but they don't know for how long. They might have to operate again."

"But she's all right, isn't she? I mean, there's no danger?"

"No immediate danger. But later, they can't say. They're afraid. They haven't told her."

"You don't mean . . . she might die?"

"That's exactly what I do mean."

"Oh, Dick . . ."

"That isn't all," he said. "I'm going back to her." She made no sound, and he could not look at her. "I've got to," he burst out. "I can't let her be alone, now."

"Of course not."

"I feel awful about you, but I've got to go. I want to go. I might as well be honest. I must go."

"You said she had a lover?"

"That's over. Besides, it doesn't matter."

"No."

"I'm afraid this kills Germany."

"Yes."

There was an immense silence. Neither looked at the other. Then she spoke.

"It's good-bye, then?"

"Oh, my dear . . ." His voice was helpless.

"It is good-bye. I've known it all this week . . . ever since Sunday. I knew it in your note. I've tried to think not. I've thought wicked things."

"Marjorie, don't!"

"It's all right. I'll go." She got up from her chair. She was dry-eyed, her face very white and almost

luminous in its pallor. She was holding herself stiffly, and came towards him like a doll.

"Marjorie, what can I say?"

"Nothing. I want you to kiss me, that's all. No, wait. Let me kiss you."

She came up to him, still with an awkward, automatic movement, and laid her hands on his shoulders, looking into his eyes, which were dark and troubled. Her own were hard and staring. She took his face in her hands and stared at it; then she drew it down to her and put her mouth against his and kissed him, slowly at first, and then fiercely.

"Come and sit down," she breathed.

She led him to his chair, where he sat, and she knelt on the floor beside him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Don't talk," she commanded, "keep still."

She began to kiss him again, to make love to him violently, shuddering as she did so, kissing his eyes and his ears, releasing a pent-up passion, as though she would somehow take complete possession of him, pushing her fingers inside the cuff of his shirt to feel the hairs upon his forearm, working them between his collar and his throat. A kind of frenzy seemed to seize her; she unbuttoned his waistcoat and his shirt, tearing them open, and began to kiss his chest, thrusting her hands inside his clothing to feel his breasts. He tried gently to release himself.

"Marjorie, don't," he said.

She collapsed suddenly, trembling violently, her head on his knees, sobbing hysterically. He stroked her hair, murmuring, "My dear, my dear." She lay there for a while, and then raised her head again, put her arms around his neck and laid her cheek against his, stammering out sentences in a hot, broken whisper.

"My darling . . . oh, my dearest . . . you, you whom I love . . . you who've had all of me . . . all of me . . . every hour, every minute. . . . You whom I love . . . my love . . . my life."

She gave herself up to the sheer ecstasy of abandon)



revelling in a last surrender of all reserve, the ultimate orgasmic declaration of her passion, until suddenly, when he felt he could bear it no longer, she tore herself from him, stood a moment quivering, and then rushed into his bedroom, slamming and locking the door behind her. He sat quite still, mechanically straightening his clothing. Presently she returned, her face set again, the stains of her weeping covered by powder.

"I'm going," she said, simply. "Don't come with me," and took up her hat from a chair, arranged it in the mirror, and went to the door, where she turned and smiled, a little mournful smile, and said, "Good-bye," and went. Richard got drunk before he went to bed.

The next day he wrote to Elinor, telling her of his intention to return home. The cottage where she was staying was on the Downs about seven miles from Eastbourne; it had small comforts and no bathroom, but Mrs. Nye was a good cook and looked admirably after her wants. She had a tiny bedroom and a minute sitting-room; when she was not working she walked or bathed or lay on the beach reading. The weather was perfect, and they were far enough from Eastbourne, separated by Beachy Head and the Seven Sisters, for the shore to be reasonably secluded and free from trippers, except over the week-ends, when swarms of motor-cars came from London carrying picnic parties to the sands. She had brought Angie with her, arranging a room for her at a cottage fifty yards away, but found her retiring disposition and her sense of her place more than a little trying in the circumstances. Angie's position, alone with Elinor, was not an easy one, perhaps; she was anxious not to intrude or force herself on her employer, and as soon as work was done, trotted off to her own cottage, or went out for walks alone, to avoid giving Elinor any occasion to feel she should invite her company; but she was apt to overdo it.

"Angie, I wish you'd stop effacing yourself quite so hard," Elinor said one day. "It's like the retreat from Moscow; it can be seen all over the countryside."

Angie went scarlet, but accompanied her to the beach that afternoon and bathed with her, undressing in elaborate modesty underneath her clothes, and ostentatiously looking away from Elinor, who was throwing her garments carelessly around.

Work went excellently in these surroundings, the novel raced ahead, and Elinor began to feel happier. The earlier months, taken up with Gus and the theatre, seemed like a strange, turbulent nightmare. The play was still running to excellent houses, and contributing a large weekly sum to her bank account, but beyond that it seemed to have no connection with her. Nancy and Cynthia and Hermione, she knew, thought it absurd of her to choose this way of living when she could well have afforded a suite at a large hotel. She could hear them discussing her in London. Nancy, indeed, had remonstrated with her before she left.

"My dear, you can't stay in a place like that," she had exclaimed, when Elinor described it to her. "No bathroom, no electric light! You must be mad! Are there any conveniences at all?"

"Outside sanitation, darling, with lovely, lovely novelettes in a rack. You tear off as far as you've read."

"Well, my dear, if you like it . . . ! I suppose you enjoy finding earwigs in your bed at night?"

"I'd rather find them than some people I know."

Richard's letter made no mention of Marjorie, but Elinor thought of her immediately and, with a generous impulse, which she half regretted after posting the letter, wrote off to ask if she would care to spend her holidays with her. Marjorie's reply came a week later, written from North Wales. She said merely that she had given up her job at Oliphant's and was taking a long holiday, walking and climbing in Snowdonia. She thanked Elinor for her invitation, and was sorry she could not accept. That was all.

After three weeks Elinor went up to London for the day. She had a certain amount of business to attend to, and she lunched with Nancy and Hermione in Lowndes Street. Nancy had been to see Brenda, who had returned

home two days before, and reported on her condition, with much speculative and rather ghoulish detail. She was enormously intrigued about Richard's return, begging Elinor for information and receiving none beyond a corroboration of the facts. Elinor enquired after Winkie and the much-advertised conception.

"My dear, it was a false alarm," said Hermione, "but they're still trying hard, and Winkie's sure it's going to be all right. She rings me up and gives me the bulletin every morning. Just at present she's got some theory about the moon that she's been trying to explain to me, rather like reckoning Easter by Golden Numbers. It seemed very complicated. She's coming in to tea this afternoon. Why don't you come back and see her?"

Hermione took her away in the car.

"Come back to the shop," she said, "and have a chat. I've heaps to tell you. I've had the grandest row with Betsy, and I've won."

"What's happened to the opera scheme? You haven't chucked it?"

"Chucked it? My dear, that's the whole point. Of course, we've not chucked it. I've got Betsy out of it all right, though."

"How?"

"I'll tell you."

She told her. It had been a long and elaborate process, involving the securing of a sum of capital large enough to swamp Betsy's five thousand. They had got twenty-five thousand. Some of it had been put up by Sir Alfred Winstanley, an elderly gentleman whose life had been spent in tabulating and balancing theories as to the identity of Mr. W. H., and the true significance of the Sonnets, and in hanging on to the fringe of theatrical society. He was enormously wealthy and a bachelor, and she had met him through Ham Sotherington, whose greatest friend, Rupert Lovelace, the actor, had been his secretary for a brief period between Oxford and the stage. Sir Alfred had been at Morris Baird's party; that was where Hermione had met him. Elinor remembered

the group, and Hermione's intense attention. The remainder of the backing had come through Sam Rossiter, whom Nancy had persuaded to find it somewhere in the City; Hermione believed it was supplied by a German egg-merchant with a taste for Offenbach.

"But how does Nancy come in?" Elinor asked in bewilderment.

"My dear, you ought to know she'll come in on anything she can. She gets her name down as a patron, and she'll meet everybody connected with it. That's all Nancy wants. Then she'll ask them all to dinner, and be happy for months. Sam's devoted to her; he'd do anything to make her happy, except put up money himself."

It appeared that, having secured the twenty-five thousand and Norman's promise of apostasy, Hermione had then forced what she called a "show-down" over the question of the settings, and that there had been a violent scene in Betsy's flat, when the old lady had turned to Norman for support, which he had declined to give. Betsy had then threatened to withdraw her capital and, on being told by Hermione that it could be dispensed with, had delivered herself of seventy years' accumulation of invective, and gone off to Marienbad on the following day, since when she had not been heard of.

"What's happened to Paul Fairless?" Elinor asked.

"Who? Oh, that little squirt! I don't know; drowned himself, I should think, and good riddance. We've been sending out circulars, and subscriptions are simply rolling in. We shall open in September with the *Fille du Régiment*, and follow it with one of Norman's for a limited run. We've got an option on the "Sovereign," that new theatre off Shaftesbury Avenue."

Elinor shortly excused herself, sent messages to Winkie, telephoned Richard and met him for tea, and then went on to Cynthia's for a cocktail. Tom came in as she was about to leave, and pressed her to stay the night. He had a dull dinner engagement, he said, which he would cancel if she could keep him company. She

accepted gladly, and sent a telegram to Angie. She enjoyed dining alone with Tom; Cynthia was engaged elsewhere. They had a scratch meal and chatted happily.

"We ought to see more of each other," Tom said. "I'm enjoying this more than any evening I've spent for years. Look here, I've got an idea. What are you doing for August?"

"I hadn't thought. Staying down at East Dean and finishing my book, I suppose, if Mrs. Nye can have me. You remember her, Tom? 'Cook' as used to be; Mrs. Harper she was, in those days. The 'Mrs.' was courtesy."

"Of course I remember. Candied peel in the kitchen in Cumberland Terrace. Do you remember old Agnes, the Scotch maid? I wonder what's happened to her."

"She came to see me not long ago. She's living in Glasgow, but she wrote she was coming up for a holiday. She sent her love to Mr. Tom."

"She must be a good age. But listen, this is what I was going to suggest. Cynthia's going to Antibes next month, to stay with some Americans; I'm going up to the Hebrides to fish. Why don't you come with me?"

"It's twenty years since I fished."

"Never mind. I wish you'd come. We'd have a splendid time, if you don't mind getting wet and roughing it a bit."

"Shall I?" she said, tempted. "It would be jolly."

They discussed plans for a while, and got out maps. Presently they were both on their knees, looking at them spread out on the floor. At half-past nine Elinor's conscience awoke.

"Tom darling, I ought to go down to the theatre. I haven't been near them all since the third night. Come with me. I shan't stay long; just see a bit of it, and go behind and gush. I shan't be in town again for ages, please God, and it's my only chance."

So they went down to the theatre, and were told at the box office that there was not an empty seat in the house. They crept in behind the Dress Circle, and stood in the darkness, watching the end of the second act. Despite all her professed contempt, Elinor felt a pleasing

thrill of pride at the sight of the crowded theatre and the rows of people who had dressed themselves up and arranged parties and spent money on coming there that evening, as others had done every evening since the opening, to see her play, to hear the words she had written; and at the thought that every evening this was going on, that, whatever she might be doing, actors were going down to the theatre at eight o'clock, making up their faces and going on to the stage to speak her words, carrying out as a routine, yet with the air of a smooth impromptu, all that she had watched them painfully rehearse, all that she had seen manufactured with so much turmoil. Then she thought of the Dress Rehearsal and of Gus, and her pleasure left her.

When the curtain fell at the end of the act, she and Tom slipped out into the street and went round to the stage door.

"I'll wait for you here," said Tom. "Dressing-rooms aren't in my line."

She went and called on Eileen Barringer, who, fortunately, was making a change of costume and so had little time to spare. She upbraided Elinor most charmingly, however, for her long absence, chiding her prettily, and protesting how much she adored the play and her part, and how she hoped they'd run for ever. She also told her she was feeling terribly ill, visiting an osteopath daily, and never going out at nights. Then she sent her dresser out of the room, and begged Elinor to try and persuade Morris Baird to take her to America in the play. Elinor, who knew that he had other plans, hedged complimentarily:

"We can't spare you here," she said.

"Darling, it's sweet of you to say so, but surely he can postpone the New York production for a bit? After all, I have worked and made a success for you here, and you say you like me in the part; I do think I ought to be given a chance to play it in America. Where's the hurry, anyway? Now, promise me you'll talk to Morris, or I shan't believe you're really pleased with me."

She begged and pleaded until the call-boy banged on the door, shouting, "Last act beginners, please!"

"There's your call," said Elinor. "I must go."

"Oh, never mind that. Let them wait."

"You'll miss your entrance."

"They can't begin without me. Now, you will speak to Morris, won't you? You're staying for the last act?"

"I can't," lied Elinor.

"Oh, you are naughty. You don't care the least little bit about us, working down here every night and making money for you. Why didn't you let me know you were coming? Next time you must tell me beforehand, and then we can go out and have supper afterwards."

In the passage Elinor ran into Morris Baird, who greeted her heartily and said he wanted to talk to her. He took her up to his office and sent for Tom to join them. He seemed calmly contented with the play's success, but told her he had been having the hell of a time with the Barringer bitch.

"You're not thinking of taking her to America, are you?" asked Elinor.

"Her? Say, who do you think I am? That's what she's aiming for, but they wouldn't look at her on Broadway. She's all right for London; they like her here, God knows why, but they do. . . ."

"I think she's very good in the part," Elinor put in tentatively.

"Good? Hell! Wait till you see Lois Fane play it, then you can talk. Not but what she can't pull a good line of temperament when she likes, too. Listen. That's what I want to talk to you about. I've been getting things set. We open in Philly, October 5th. You're coming over, huh?"

Elinor explained that she was not intending to do so, and brought down on herself such a flood of persuasion, flattery and bullying that she went away promising to think it over.

"Why don't you go to America?" Tom asked her. "Get out of England for the winter and give that damned chest of yours a chance in a dry climate. You

can work just as well over there, surely? You're making money; you can afford the trip. Why don't you go?"

When she returned to East Dean the following day, she found a letter from her American publishers who, hearing of the forthcoming production, were pressing her to come over; and another from a New York firm of lecture agents, offering her, in flattering language, attractive terms for a tour, and enclosing a circular illustrated with photographs of forty world-famous authors, actors and explorers, of whom she had only heard of six. These two letters, coming on top of Tom's semi-professional advice, caused her to weaken in her resolution, and to spend two fretted days in trying to make up her mind, weighing up pros and cons. She had been only once to America since her childhood, and her visit had been brief.

She had frequently wished, since, to return, but somehow the right opportunity had never arisen; some obligation always prevented it. For the three years following her visit she had talked of going, and then had allowed it to slide, with so many other things in her life, into the realm of "one day," where it remained as an unfulfilled ambition, teasing her. Yet, now that the opportunity was here, the fact of her having wanted it for so long somehow dulled her pleasure in it, and made her hesitate. She was held back, too, by the memory of her emotions on her first night, the sense that she had had of its all being a form of cheapening self-advertisement, mixed with the knowledge that, up to the last ditch at any rate, she had enjoyed it, and the fear that America would mean the repetition of all that on a far larger scale. Her books were popular in the States, and the letters from her publishers and the lecture agents assured her of a "hearty personal welcome from her public." She shrank from the prospect of the publicity, yet the idea of revisiting America attracted her, and it seemed foolish to reject this opportunity. Finally, after two annoying days, during which the fact of her indecision was constantly getting between her and her book and her



appreciation of the weather and the country, she went to bed resolving to come to a final decision before starting work the next morning, so that she might enjoy her day without having it in her mind. She came down to breakfast and took up the *Daily Sketch*, which was lying beside her plate. It opened at a photograph of Gus, smiling out at her from the page, over a caption about his forthcoming marriage to Lady Sybil Trask. She put down the paper, with a sudden recurrence of emotion at the sight of his face, an indeterminate mixture of anger and regret, and made her decision. The memory of him still had power to hurt, still had power to awaken all that she despised most in herself, malice and anger and a sentimental lingering over the past; she had better go to America, where she would not constantly be running the risk of meeting him, where his wife could not telephone and beg her to come to lunch or tea. "I'll go," she said to herself, and felt immediate relief in the resolution.

She asked Angie that morning if she would come with her, and Angie, fluctuating between the thrill of adventure and a fear of the sea, asked for a few days in which to think it over and write to her parents. Elinor scribbled a note to Morris Baird, telling him of her decision, and received a telegram in reply that ran: "Attagirl. Morris." A few days later Angie, with real regret, announced that her father did not want her to go; his health was bad, and he disliked the idea of her being so far away in case anything should happen to him. She was near to tears of disappointment, but filial duty came first.

Elinor arranged her sailing without going up to town, one of her many remote and unlikely friendships coming to her aid. There was a man in the London Cunard office whom she had known as a clerk of the P. & O. line in Hong-Kong twenty years ago; she had run into him in Cockspur Street only six months before, and had greeted him with all the enthusiasm for a long lost friend. He had been overjoyed at her remembering him, and a note to him now secured her a passage at minimum

rate on the *Berengaria* at her most crowded time, sailing from Southampton on September 15th.

She spent the rest of July and the first week of August at the cottage, working furiously to finish her book, dictating, writing on the beach in long hand, or herself composing on the typewriter late into the night.

Evelyn Anthony came down to spend a long week-end just after her school broke up, before going off to the Dolomites with her mother and some of her relatives from Belgium.

"They were all staying in the house when I got back from school," she told Elinor. "I had three days of them before coming down here, and mother didn't like my coming, much. She said it looked so rude to them, dashing away like this. But if I've got to spend the whole summer with them, I really don't see why I shouldn't. Oh, Elinor, I wish you weren't going to America! I know exactly what will happen. You'll get snapped up by the Talkies and whisked off to Hollywood, where you'll make your fortune and stay for years, and God knows when I shall see you again. I suppose I shan't even be back before you sail. Oh, Elinor, you don't know what an awful summer I'm going to have! I do hate my relations so. I'm supposed to make friends with my cousin Irène, because she's the same age as me—as if that was any reason! She's the most horrible girl, with a perfectly disgusting mind. And then Auntie Violet has the nerve to tell mother she thinks I'm badly brought up, and that she oughtn't to let me read the books I do. Well, at least I do my reading openly; you should see the stuff Irène reads in secret! D. H. Lawrence is nothing to it!"

"Darling, have you been reading D. H. Lawrence?" Elinor laughed.

"Yes. I got *Women in Love* out of the library, and Irène borrowed it, and then there was trouble! As a matter of fact, I couldn't read it, anyway. And there was a lot of fuss about Aldous Huxley too, because I had *Those Barren Leaves* in my bedroom. Mother was rather sweet about it. She told me that while she understood and

thought it was quite all right, it was no use shocking other people, and that I'd better put books like that away while the family was there. But she rather spoiled it by saying she didn't know what people wanted to write books like that for, and that while she wasn't going to forbid me to read them, she wished I wouldn't, all the same. Mother's easily swayed, you know. She wants to be broad-minded and modern, if only for Jack's sake, and Jack's all for my reading anything I like, but I think Auntie Violet shook her a bit. She must have talked to her for hours! You don't think I oughtn't to read D. H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley, do you?"

"I don't think you oughtn't to, darling, but I don't think there's an awful lot of point in your doing so. I don't think they're going to do you any good."

"How funny you are, Elinor! I never thought you'd say that."

Elinor was a little surprised at herself for saying it, but she felt again that curious conflict in her mind which, while it disapproved of prudery and hypocrisy and censorship, and had often enough argued against them in print, yet reacted against itself in practical cases such as this. She was reminded of her conversation with Gus four months ago. Her reason and her instinct led her in opposite directions; instinctively she wished that Evelyn should not read modern, frank-spoken literature, feeling that it tarnished somewhat the thing that she loved in her, although when she tried to define that thing she found herself forced back to what sounded like sentimental cant phrases. She certainly could not explain it to Evelyn now.

"You don't disapprove of them, do you?" Evelyn asked.

"No, not by themselves."

"But you think I'm too young?"

"Yes, in a way. I don't think you've got the background to see them in their proper proportions."

"I don't see how I'm ever going to get it," Evelyn returned, "especially if you're going off to America and

leaving me alone like this. You know you're my only link with the outside world."

"Darling, I'm not going for ever," Elinor assured her; but Evelyn turned suddenly sullen and obstinate, and refused to listen to reason.

"Oh yes, that's what you say," she grumbled, "but you'll probably stay on and on, and I shall never see you again. You know what knowing you has done for me; at least, if you don't, you jolly well ought to. You've been my one escape from everything I hate at home and the suburban life I have there, my one chance of getting out and having anyone I can really talk to, anyone who really understands me; and then you go and fall down on the job like this. You should never have encouraged me in the first place if you didn't mean to keep it up."

"Evelyn, aren't you being a little ridiculous?" Elinor asked, and tried first to laugh and then to bully her into common sense. But Evelyn was enjoying self-pity, finding a luxury in self-encouragement in her unhappiness at the approaching separation, deliberately making it worse, and sulked pettishly for two of her three days, driving Elinor to exasperation; making her see, even, a certain justice in the accusation that she should not have undertaken a friendship with the child if her going away produced such an effect as this. The justice, she felt, was both superficial and profound: superficially, it was negligible, since Evelyn's present behaviour, even though based on a genuine grief at losing her, was merely childish, an adolescent wallowing, for which the proper treatment was a sound smacking; but she saw a deeper truth in the charge, which disturbed her with a disturbance akin to that which she had felt in her discussion with Gus. Was she not, by her friendship, endangering the placidity of Evelyn's normally destined life; was she not, in the phrase which Mrs. Anthony would probably employ, "giving the child ideas"? Had she the right to do so? Gus had said that he considered the friendship a serious mistake; she was suddenly fearful lest he should

be right, lest she were laying up disaster, of which this present exhibition of Evelyn's was a portent.

On the last day of her visit the girl threw aside her histrionics, apologised for them, and became simple, natural and confidential once again; but Elinor received the change of mood guardedly and with something less than her usual warmth, frightened a little by the glimpse that she had had of what might be in store for her. She registered a resolution of wariness, a determination to let down gradually on this intimacy when she returned, to wean Evelyn, if she could, from her dependence. When she changed her resentment against Elinor's going to a genuine expression of regret, Evelyn found that she met with little response, but only with an obvious attempt to turn the conversation. In the end, Elinor took her for a walk and tried to talk to her, to explain something of what she felt about their friendship, but she had scarcely begun before she caught sight of the child's face, dark and pale and tense, with tears trembling in her eyes, and then refrained, realising that the problem was one which she, herself, must work out alone. She saw her go with relief, but the visit had implanted a new fear in her. She was thankful again that she was going away; time might do much to lessen the danger of this friendship; she must be very careful with it when she returned.

Apart from Evelyn, she saw and talked to no one but Angie and Mrs. Nye, and by the first week in August her book was finished.

"I don't much like the look of it," she told Angie, turning over its chapters in revision. "It smells to me as if it's gone bad somewhere in the middle, but perhaps that's only because I know."

"It seems very good to me," said Angie.

"But not as good as *The Rose Garden*," teased Elinor.

"Miss Johnson, I never said that . . ."

"You'll be wanting a testimonial, won't you, lovey? I wish you'd write out what you'd like me to say."

"Oh, but I couldn't do that," Angie protested.

"Why not? Well, give me a bit of paper. Now recite the adjectives to me. Honest, scrupulously honest—I think I might underline that; reliable; trustworthy; accurate; efficient; virtuous. Would you like me to put that in?"

"Miss Johnson, *don't* . . . please!"

Elinor saw suddenly that Angie was distressed, and refrained from teasing. The testimonial which she finally handed her, however, was a glowing one, and Angie was very touched by it.

Gus's wedding she missed by remaining at the cottage, but it was generously reported and pictured in the papers, to which Angie, in delighted ignorance, called her attention. The couple were said to have left for Italy. Elinor came to London two days later. Angie travelled up with her, and her good-bye speech at the station, wishing her success and happiness in America, thanking her for all her past kindness, and telling her, for almost the first time, how greatly she had enjoyed working for her, was so patently heartfelt that Elinor was moved and suddenly kissed her, at which Angie began to cry, so that she had to start teasing again to stop her.

Her month with Tom she adored, fishing on one of the islands of the Outer Hebrides, barren and supremely beautiful in its austerity of moor, rock and sea. When it rained the island was a dull, wind-swept stretch of brown, the hills blotted out in mist, and the rain driving across it in great slanting sheets; but there were days of sun when the sea turned blue as any water of the Mediterranean; and stretches between rain when the sky was washed and clean, and the sea a milky sheet of glass, and windy colours came and went on the hillsides as the shadows of clouds passed over them. And there were long, softly coloured evenings, light until almost midnight, and one prodigious sunset which they saw from the boat the night of their arrival, with the whole chain of the islands, black and purple against a blaze of gold, strange sinister shapes of loneliness, that suggested cannibal islands, cruel and desolate and fiercely beautiful.

They stayed at a small fishing inn, spending their evenings in a tiny private sitting-room with a peat fire burning, for which they were grateful; taking novels from the shelves in the drawing-room, novels of the kind that one finds in the circulating libraries of stationers' and fancy-work shops in the smaller English seaside towns, forgotten works by almost forgotten authors of the first years of the century, interspersed with some torn classics and books on the Hebrides. Among them Elinor found *David Copperfield* and *Our Mutual Friend*, and spent a happy evening with Tom, each taking one book, reading silently for a while and then breaking out delightedly, "I say, do you remember this?", reading aloud, reviving other memories of Dickens, reciting lists of characters and incidents, and falling into joyful laughter over Mrs. Gummidge and Hamlet's aunt, and the Podsnaps and Veneerings and Mr. Venus.

It was good to be alone with Tom again, to enjoy to the full the understanding and affection which, in London, could only be hinted at in snatched moments and hasty exchanged glances.

"I wish we saw more of each other," Tom said, "but you're so damned social, and I'm so damned busy. I suppose you're busy, too, though I can never imagine how you find the time to work. Tell me about yourself, Nell. I don't really know much."

Elinor told him the whole story of Gus. She had not meant to do so. "It was your calling me Nell that did it," she said afterwards. "I haven't been called Nell for twenty years."

"What did you do it for?" Tom asked her, but kindly. "I'm not disapproving. I'm interested."

"What did I go to bed with him for? I don't know. I wanted to. I liked him."

"I suppose that's reason enough."

"No, not by itself. It wasn't only that. But I thought he was the kind of person I wanted in my life. He made me laugh. I wanted him around. Well, you can't have that without the other thing, if the man wants it. You've either got to go to bed with him, or lose him. I've known

it happen over and over again. There's no friendship between men and women. Richard's the only real man friend I've got, and that's only possible because of Brenda, who's been his lightning conductor, sort of. But it wasn't quite that in this case. I wanted Gus."

"He never suggested marriage?"

"Good Lord, no. It never occurred to either of us. I don't think I would have married him, though, even if he had thought of it. It was just . . . fun. I wasn't in love with him, but I wanted him there, that's all. I'm annoyed with myself now, the way it's turned out, but one never gets out of these things without paying for them; usually with one's pride. I don't regret it—sleeping with him, I mean. I'm only angry that I didn't see through him quicker, that I laid myself open to be hurt like that. Are you shocked, Tom?"

"Good God, no! I tell you, I'm interested . . . in your point of view about these things."

"I'm not . . ." She checked herself. "I won't say I'm not promiscuous, because I've never known anybody yet who'd admit that they were. It's like being without a sense of humour, the one thing nobody will admit to. But there have only been," she paused to make a calculation, "seven men in my life, including Roly. I don't think that's a lot. Perhaps it is, and I'm an abandoned woman. I don't know. Anyway, I've got no conscience about it. I've never come between husband and wife, and as far as I know I've never hurt anyone else by anything I've done."

"Nell, don't!"

"Don't what?"

"Recite your comforts."

She laughed, suddenly.

"Was I? Was I getting maudlin and self-righteous? 'Pore I *may* be, but I've always kep' myself *to* myself,'" she quoted, joyously. "Darling Tom, bless you for pulling me up!"

"Well, you sounded a bit Gummidgey: 'I'm a lone lorn creature, and things go contrairy with me.' Do they?"



"Not a bit."

"Perhaps you 'feel them more'?"

She chuckled, happily.

"Tom, you *are* a comfort."

"Seriously, Nell, you're all right, though?"

"Of course I'm all right."

"I sometimes wish . . ."

"What?"

"That things were different with you."

She did not ask what he meant.

"So do I," she said, quietly.

"I'd like to see you married," he went on, and this time she did not answer him.

A long silence fell, while they both stared at the peat blocks on the fire. Then she said suddenly and with no apparent thought link:

"Do you remember Mr. F.'s aunt, and the toast-crusts that she gave Arthur Clennam to eat for her? Dear Mr. F.'s aunt!"

Tom looked out of the window.

"Let's go for a stroll before turning in," he said.

They walked in a chill grey evening down the road from the inn that led to the sea, past the crofters' dwellings, fantastically thatched and sprouting grass, like South Sea islanders' huts, the air laden with the pleasant homely smell of peat, a scent mingled of earth and wood-smoke, from the stacks of dark brown blocks and the ground beside them, damp and newly cut, looking like a rich deep chocolate cake. They climbed a tiny eminence and looked back over the grim, water-logged land behind them, and then out to sea, dark and cold under a leaden sky in which there lingered yet a last trace of colour in the west. Elinor stood, her feet planted firmly apart, her hands thrust into the pockets of her raincoat, with her head raised and her eyes staring out into the distance, while the wind blew her hair about her face, and she breathed deeply, greedily almost, as though she could somehow fill herself with all this and make it a part of her, the wind, the cold sea, and the grey sky, all the starkness and inimical austerity

if it, which were stinging her senses to appreciation. She stood there a long while, ignoring Tom, who was watching her covertly, until she turned to him, saying brusquely, almost rudely, "Let's go back."

They walked to the inn in silence.

**END OF PART I.**



## PART II



### XIII

SHE had a week in London before sailing, a rushed and hectic week, taken up with a wild getting together of clothes, a feverish, distracted haste of shopping, and a last scramble to see all her friends once. Fortunately, a number of them were still out of town. Richard had taken Brenda to Torquay, where she was making slow recovery from her operation. He came up to London especially to see Elinor, however, and they spent her last evening together, dining and going to a revue, and talking until three in the morning. Although he loathed Torquay, he seemed happier to be with Brenda again, looking after her, than he had been for years.

He came to Waterloo to see her off at half-past eight the next morning, and she leaned from her compartment window, waving him good-bye, until he was out of sight.

She found the voyage a comfortable rest after her last week, and spent most of her time reading in her steamer-chair. She had no lack of books. The day before sailing she had gone into Hatchard's and bought a rapid and over-generous selection of literature, gathering it in hasty armfuls from shelves and counters; and Nancy, Hermione, Angie and Belinda had all had the idea of sending her the latest novels to read on the boat. There was one in particular, the bright jacket of which she saw on almost every chair on deck, a prodigiously long and rollicking romance of the open road, which had been the wholesome and substantial fare of the entire British reading public during the summer holidays; Elinor presented three copies of it to the ship's library. For the rest she lay and watched the flirtations and the dogged "three times round equals a mile" forms of exercise that were going on on deck. Winkie, who had forgotten

to send a *bon voyage* telegram to the boat, wirelessly her on the second day out: "Lovely luck, darling. Winkie, Goronwy and son."

She landed in New York on a Friday, a morning of great, though not unpleasant heat. She came on deck as they passed the statue of Liberty, and as she stood watching the skyline, and receiving, rather to her surprise, the genuine thrill at its beauty, she remembered how, the first time she had seen it, she had been asked what she thought of it, and had answered, "It looks exactly like New York," experiencing a faint sense of disappointment at finding something looking as she had always known that it would look. But to-day, coming back to it and seeing it emerge before her out of the faint mist into the morning sunshine, it recalled to her the day she had last seen it, sailing in the late afternoon, with the sun turning its windows to fire, and felt her blood tingle and her throat constrict and a slight mist of excitement come into her eyes. "I'm doing it properly," she told herself, with a little laugh.

Morris Baird had come to the boat to meet her, an attention she had not expected, stepping forward from the crowd and shouting: "Hello, Baby!" as she came down the gang-plank. He helped her speedily through the Customs, and presented her to a group of journalists waiting to interview her. It was one o'clock when they left the docks, and coming out into the street to find his car, the midday heat mingled with the smell of New York rose up at her, the smell she had forgotten, a pungently individual smell, such as all cities have, compounded, in this case, of petrol, drug-stores, coffee and hot pavements, so that again she felt an emotion, curiously akin to home-sickness, in the re-discovery, an emotion so violent that it startled her.

"I'd forgotten how much I loved New York," she said to Morris, as they bumped up Tenth Avenue.

He took her to her hotel, a small one in the East Fifties, and lunched with her in her sitting-room. The sight of the menu threw her into a further paroxysm of recollection.

"Oh, God!" she cried, "there are so many things I want to eat again: Clam Chowder and Oyster Stew, and Soft-shelled Crabs and Clam Juice Cocktails, and Pumpkin Pie, and Chile Con Carne, and Baked Shad Roe, and Sweet Potatoes with Marshmallows . . . oh, and Terrapin, and Hot Popovers, and Alligator Pears, and Baked Alaska and . . ."

"Here, wait a minute! Wait a minute!" laughed Morris. "You can't have all those at once."

"I know," said Elinor. "I was just reciting a litany, that's all."

All the same, she made an absurdly heterogeneous meal, ending with corn-on-the-cob and strawberry shortcake. By way of drink she ordered iced tea, and behaved like a child on a birthday treat, throughout the lunch.

Morris Baird left her with a promise to attend to her bootlegging, called for her again in the evening and took her to dinner, the theatre and a party.

Her first few weeks in America were extremely pleasant. Her publishers staged an elaborate party for her; she made friends and discovered old ones; she was entertained by the literary and theatrical crowd of New York, taken to the openings of new plays and to every first-night party; almost all her week-ends she spent in the country, staying in private houses, surrounded by a flaming autumn, vividly incredible in its colouring. The only complaints which she had to make were that she was seldom allowed to go to bed before five in the morning, and that she had almost no time to herself in which to explore the glimpses she caught of things which she wanted to see at leisure.

She went to Philadelphia for the opening of her play, which did not take place without a certain amount of preliminary trouble—trouble which was as nothing, however, to what followed. The leading lady, Lois Fane, was a young actress of really astonishing beauty, dark, slender and fragile, whose appearance sent interviewers and journalists into long, rhapsodic articles in which the phrases "sunlit spray," "shimmering moon-



beams" and "windblown thistledown," were seldom absent. When Elinor first saw her on the stage, she, too, caught her breath in wonder at the slight, graceful, swaying figure whose every movement was a tiny miracle of loveliness. She was not, however, a particularly good actress, and she had an unlimited capacity for making herself personally unpopular.

She had made her first appearance five years before, at the age of twenty, in a sentimental comedy called *Little Miss Millionaire*, the story of a slum child who inherited a fortune, and had played it for two years in New York, and for a third on the road. She had come to the stage almost straight from High School, and her success had gone to her head. Morris Baird had discovered her and was reputed to have made her his mistress. Whatever the truth of that story, he was certainly enslaved by her, and her capacity as an actress was the one blind spot in his theatrical make-up. After *Little Miss Millionaire* had ended its third year, she reappeared in New York in a gambling drama, entitled *Ace, King, Queen*, which was not a success. It received unfavourable notices, and she resented them, answering back and making scenes at parties, which was not forgotten against her. She had followed that, in the season preceding the present one, with a locked-door-and-revolver melodrama culminating in a court-room scene, in which, in furs and a spotlight, Lois Fane had delivered herself of the heroine's life story in an unbroken twenty-minute monologue, and the Press had let loose, joyously and with released malice, against her the morning after the production. The play had run three weeks, and Lois had blamed everyone and everything but herself and her own acting, writing long letters to the papers about it. She had tried again, however, with a light and innocuous comedy called *Gingham and Plaits*, which, by its sugary appeal and her own personal charms and cuteness, had managed to survive three months.

All of this Elinor had learned, together with some mildly alarming stories of her "temperament," soon after landing in New York. She found Lois Fane charm-

ing enough at first meeting, however, and hoped for the best, but put herself in the wrong with her, quite unconsciously, even before their Philadelphia opening, by making friends with an actress playing the second female part, a girl whose brother she knew well in England. She took her to supper on the roof of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel after the Dress Rehearsal, and seeing the leading man leaving the theatre alone, invited him to join them. She admitted afterwards that it had perhaps been tactless of her, but she had done it in pure friendliness and thoughtlessness. Lois Fane, however, saw it as a personal insult, and refused to speak to her on their opening night.

The Philadelphia opening was not an unqualified success; the Press was kindly but unenthusiastic, and Lois Fane declared the play to be at fault, demanding to have it altered. Elinor agreeably complied, and was kept busy re-writing and attending rehearsals, which were made no pleasanter by the fact that the weather was drippingly and almost intolerably hot, and by Lois's inability ever to be less than three-quarters of an hour late.

From Philadelphia, where it stayed two weeks, the play moved on to Washington, where it was chillily received. Elinor, however, had a delightful time in the city, which enchanted her; she was widely entertained and spoiled, and, in an unguarded moment, said as much to Lois on one of the now rare occasions that they met. Lois, already angry at the play's reception, now grew angrier still, and knowing Elinor to be in the audience that evening, set herself out deliberately to rag the part, making her last entrance with the stage cat in her arms, talking to it below her breath and doing her best to upset the other members of the company.

The rest of the cast waited on Elinor next morning, begging her to take no notice. They all cordially disliked Lois, but assured her that this behaviour would in no way affect her New York success, which they were convinced was inevitable. She found them all charming;

kindly, friendly, and filled with the best possible goodwill towards her. She remained for the rest of the week in Washington, enjoying herself and forgetting the theatre; she did not see Lois again.

The play had two more weeks on the road before opening in New York, but Elinor returned there and rented a small flat on West Fifty-fourth Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, from a woman writer who was going to Hollywood. She had made up her mind now to stay the whole winter in America, and settled down as comfortably as she could among the heavy brocade and gilt Italianate furniture with which the flat was crowded, clearing out as many occasional tables, tabourets, pedestals and vases as she could get into the tiny box-room. She found everyone kind and helpful, and began to feel thoroughly at home in New York, adjusting herself speedily to its tempo and behaviour, fascinated to learn its sets and its prejudices, its cliques and its rivalries, its scandal and its intricacies of past divorce and re-marriage. It was amusing to come, as she did, into a literary world where she already had a place, and yet to be unfamiliar with its personalities, to meet the owners of the names she already knew well in print, to move warily and with interest among them, discovering the significance that they possessed in their own country, piecing together scraps of information, criticism and gossip, composing for herself a gradual yet never completed picture from the jig-saw pieces, which grew daily more numerous, finding at each gathering she attended some new, curiously shaped fragment fitting into a space that had puzzled her, clarifying some obscurity in the rest of the picture. She made blunders now and then, but on the whole she was well liked, and formed an increasing number of friendships in widening, remotely intersecting circles.

A few days after her installation in her apartment, as she had learned to call it—quickly accustoming herself to the interchangeability of flat and apartment, lift and elevator, pavement and sidewalk, page and bell-boy, and yet neither consciously employing the new termin-

ology nor adhering to the old in any self-advertising spirit of policy, but merely slipping easily and by degrees into the speech she daily heard around her—she was walking along Forty-second Street, after a call at Morris Baird's office, when she found herself suddenly face to face with Paul Fairless.

"Good God!" she ejaculated. "What in the name of Landseer are you doing in New York?"

He laughed in equal astonishment at her phrase.

"Why Landseer?" he asked.

"I don't know. Why not? Well, this is a surprise! Whoever would have thought it? Dear, dear, dear! how small the world is, when you come to think of it! Now where have I heard that remark before? You're not looking a bit surprised to see me."

"I'm not," he answered. "I knew you were in New York. I've been reading what you think of American women, and how you were present at Ethel Barrymore's opening, almost every day. You seem in very good spirits."

"I am. Aren't you? Don't you adore New York?"

"Frankly, no," he answered. "I abominate it."

"How long have you been here?"

"Two and a half months. Ever since the middle of August."

"Doing what?"

"Damn all. Waiting around for a play to come on, of which there doesn't seem the slightest probability any more."

"Your own?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I'm sorry. You must tell me about it. Where are you living? Come and have lunch with me on Sunday, won't you, if you're not going away for the week-end? I want to know all about the opera row and what really happened between you and Betsy."

"Have you had any further news of it?" he asked.

"Yes. A whole sheaf of letters. I'll tell you on Sunday. Where shall we lunch? Make it the Plaza, at one. See you there."

She had already received, from Nancy and Hermione,

letters with such glowing accounts of the dazzling social first night of the *Fille du Régiment*, and the party afterwards at Claridge's, that she had been scarcely able to read them, made vertiginous by their superlatives. A less impassioned note from Richard, written a few days later, however, had given her a more appreciable picture; it had all been very glittering, he said, but slightly chilly, and at the subsequent party everyone had rather gingerly avoided the subject of the evening's entertainment. When she reached home this afternoon she found a large packet of English mail awaiting her, among it letters from Winkie, Cynthia, Nancy, Hermione, Richard, and, to her astonishment, one which bore what she thought to be Gus's handwriting. She opened Richard's first:

"We're staying with the Massingers [he wrote]. They've got one of those nice country houses with an abundance of attractive notepaper in one's bedroom, and two quill pens and three different coloured varieties of sealing-wax.

"It's half-past nine on Sunday morning, and I've had breakfast in bed, and read the letters of Mr. O. Thake with a great deal of pleasure. And now it is raining, which means a horrid day of seeing too much of everybody, too close quarters, and bridge and the wireless and crossword puzzles, and not being able to get at the *Observer* until after lunch, and having to pretend that the *Sunday Pictorial* is just as good.

"Also staying in the house are A. C. K. (Gus) Benford and his Lady wife, who appear to be friends of yours. Wasn't he with you that afternoon at Queen's Hall? His new novel has just appeared. It is called *Animated Bust*, and is very clever and very silly, and faintly coprophilous and quite unfuriating. Has it reached America yet? I have an idea they'll like it. It is a society success here, and much talked about. Personally I am afraid I don't care for him; he bounds, though with all the grace of a ballet dancer. We don't talk much, but eye each other mistrustfully; he with perfect manners, and I much less so. He spoke of you last night in terms of restrained but affectionate enthusiasm, and asked me to give you his love, if I were writing. I like his wife, but I wish she wouldn't try so hard; it's tiring, and a little embar-

raising. However, they appear to like each other, which is something in this world.

"Your last letter, written on Western Union telegraph forms and (as you so unnecessarily added) in the train, reached me just before we left London—left it, oh, God, how thankfully! Rain, and fog, and damp; the first half of the week shiveringly cold, and the last vilely and unexpectedly muggy, with the atmosphere of a warmed-up Irish stew. I wish to God I could get Brenda away, but she won't come. She's made an amazing recovery, far quicker than anyone could have expected, but it's left her with a sort of fear, the fear of missing anything. She wants to be at every party and every first night, rests the whole day and goes out every evening. Neither I, nor the doctors, can stop her. At least, they won't; they say there's no reason why she shouldn't, if she can do it. That's what it's been—theatres and concerts and parties—all the old life over again, with a sort of new, hectic quality that it never used to have. There are times when I wonder if she knows—of the danger of a recurrence, I mean—and is doing all this 'in case.' But I don't think it's that. I know that she was terrified at the time; know it from a number of things, and especially from the way in which she questioned me afterwards, trying to trip me, trying to make me contradict my story. I've got a kind of idea that that terror has left its mark on her, and that this is its mark. God knows I can't blame her, knowing what I do; nor have I any right to try and stop her. But, oh, God, I wish she wouldn't. It's all so gruesome, and rather like a 'Todentanz.' She looks ill and frightened, but very lovely; more frailly so than ever.

"Last Wednesday was the first night of Norman Clifford's opera, *Old Peterkin's Music*. I've been putting off writing to you about it, because I felt incapable. You know, or perhaps you don't, that the *Fille du Régiment* was a failure, although they ran it three weeks. Hermione blames it on the fact that they opened too early in the season, before 'society' had returned to London; you wouldn't have thought so if you had seen the Press stuff she got out for their opening. I've been seeing a lot of her lately, through Brenda's musical crowd: her and Norman and that spotty Sotherington youth and old Sir Alfred Winstanley. I can honestly say that I've never seen more of people that I liked less!

Anyhow, they kept the theatre closed for two weeks, and

then put on *Old Peterkin*, which turned out to be a more revolting specimen of light operatic art than I should have believed possible: a tinkling, self-conscious, pink-sugar-and-icing, second-hand German Christmas-tree; Hans Andersen drowned in syrup, and full of 'pretty' tunes.' The audience was acutely embarrassed, and the intervals were an agony of social discomfort. I got Brenda away during the second. 'Ham' Sotherington's sets were brilliant, I must admit, although conceived entirely as parody, I can't help feeling. Norman seemed to be almost the only person present who did not realise what was going on, and appeared to be cramming a lifetime's importance and enjoyment into his two hours at the conductor's stand. It would only be malicious of me to send you the notices. I hear it is closing, and that they're reviving the *Fille du Régiment* while they get something else ready. With great forethought they announced beforehand that each opera would be put on for a limited run, and possibly revived later, which makes a graceful get-out for them. But somebody's money is going down the drain; however, Norman and Hermione and Nancy Rossiter (who comes in, somehow) are having a lovely time.

"I must go and have a bath. I'm glad you're liking America. I shouldn't, I know, but that's got nothing to do with it.—Love,

Richard."

Winkie's letter, to which she turned next, was scrawled over three double pages of notepaper in an enormous handwriting, and so illegible and unpunctuated as to take a very long time to read:

"Darling [it ran], I've been oughting to write to you for ages but I've been quite dreadfully busy and I know you won't mind. By the way it's really quite certain now—about the baby I mean—next May or June which is an awkward time but I suppose it can't be helped. Of course it doesn't show yet but after it's over I'm going to go and be seen to like the cats though judging from the difficulty this time I shouldn't think there'd be much danger—still you never know. Hermione's had her boudoir done over by Ham Sotherington—black velvet and silver and Nancy says she's going to too—only in pink and chocolate which sounds like a sweet-shop. Went last Wednesday to Norman's little

opera *Old Peterkin's Music*—perfectly sweet—all about an old man with a shop full of violins and flutes—they come to life and he goes to sleep and dreams—ever such pretty music but the ballet darling really was a bit off. I don't believe even when I'm eight months gone I'll be as heavy as they were—still I suppose you can't really have a lovely voice and dance. I'm glad you're having a nice time—have you seen any Red Indians?

“Heaps and heaps of love,

Winkie.”

She left Nancy's and Hermione's letters unopened for the time being, feeling that she could not face any more of *Old Peterkin* just then, and turned with interest to Gus's. Richard's meeting with him presumably explained his having written.

“I could have wished you with us last Wednesday [he wrote], at the performance of an opera which persists in my memory in calling itself ‘Squirrel Nutkin.’

‘It was a horrid evening  
When old Norman's work was done,  
And he, at the conductor's desk,  
Was having all the fun.  
And round us sported joyfully,  
That pushful dame, Hermione.’

“The ballad continues for many verses, with the burden:  
‘It was a funny opera.’

“I met your Richard Gilchrist in the country last week-end with an extremely lovely wife. They are dining with us next week.

“I hear you are having a riotous time. Sybil joins me in love.

Gus.”

That was all. Elinor read it through three times, wondering why he had written it. Was it just to show off his parody, which had certainly succeeded in making her laugh, a sudden streak of irresistible vanity, or for the sake of the jab in the phrase “your Richard Gilchrist,” and the information that Richard and Brenda were dining with them, as though rubbing it in that he



had refused to know them as her friends, but had won them for himself? Or had he genuinely missed her, and was it she who was reading this pettiness and malice into his motives? She did not know, but she left the letter unanswered.

She waited twenty minutes for Paul Fairless on the Sunday before she discovered that he had stationed himself in the Fifty-ninth Street entrance-hall of the Plaza, while she fretted impatiently on the Fifth Avenue side. He was looking a good deal tidier than she remembered having seen him before, wearing an obviously recent blue suit, which was unspotted and well-fitting; his whole appearance seemed to have gained in smartness and to have had money spent on it. Remembering what Lydia Walsh had said about his finances, she wondered where it had come from.

Over lunch she asked him questions about himself, and found him more than willing to talk. Almost everything that he said was resentful. He was full of bitterness against Norman, Hermione and Betsy. The last-named had sent him the briefest of notes before going off to Marienbad after her row with the others, and had made no explanation, although she had been holding out prospects of success and had been getting him to submit scene-designs to her until two days before her disappearance. From Marienbad she had sent him as a solatium a cheque for £20, which he had returned in pieces. He considered that he had been disgracefully treated.

"There's one thing I've never understood," he said, "and that was how she got on to me in the first place. All I knew was that I got a mysterious letter out of the blue one day, asking me to come and see her, and when I got there she told me I was a genius and that she was going to be the making of me. I asked her how she'd found me or where she'd heard of me, and all she did was to chuckle and tap her nose, and say: 'Trust old Betsy to know a good thing if it's going,' and tell me what a wise old woman she was. I suppose she'd seen a reproduction of some sets of mine in a magazine, somewhere."

"No," said Elinor; "as a matter of fact, *I* was responsible."

"You?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes, I gave her your name."

"But how did you know anything about me?"

"I'd heard about you from Lydia Walsh. Do you remember, we met you outside Gaston's?"

"And you remembered? What made you? Did Lydia speak up for me?" He sounded astonished.

"She told me what you did. Betsy happened to ask me the same evening if I knew anyone to do her sets for her, so I suggested she should see you. That's all."

"Good Lord, I never knew. Betsy never mentioned it. That *was* decent of you."

"I should think you'd curse me, the way it's turned out."

"It was frightfully good of you to think of me. And I was so rude to you about it all the night of your play, at that party she took me to. I say, I'm frightfully sorry. I'd no idea. I was in a damned bad temper that night, anyway."

Elinor laughed, and asked him what he was doing in New York. His tale was a further recital of betrayal and disappointment. A play he had written, a sort of fantastic, symbolic tragedy, he said, had been tried out by a summer stock company with some success, and sold to a New York manager. He had himself come over in obedience to a cable which he showed her, producing it from a shabby pocket-book, and handing it across the luncheon-table with an almost pathetic gesture of virtuous self-justification, which somehow suggested a betrayed servant-girl producing her seducer's letters. It bore signs of having been handled and produced and re-read many times. It ran: "Play magnificent stop New York theatre engaged October 1st but imperative you come over re-write last act sail immediately."

She folded it along its creases, and handed it back to him.

"I sympathise," she said. "I know what re-writing is."

"Oh, that was nothing," he replied, with a kind of truculent airiness. "As a matter of fact I knew what it wanted when I wrote it. I did that in a couple of days, but the way they've been playing me up since I got here is what I complain of."

Apparently everything had fallen through. The New York management had further wanted a happy ending given to the play, and on his refusing to comply, had allowed their contract to expire, since when the piece had been hawked round the town, various managers exhibiting shadowy interest in it and then letting it go, saying that they were unable to cast it.

"There are still a couple of possibles," he told her, "whom I'm waiting to hear from definitely. Oh, it'll be all right in the end, I suppose; but meanwhile here am I kept hanging about, with nothing to do. I hardly know anyone in New York, and I loathe the place, anyway."

"You're married, aren't you?" she asked. "Is your wife with you?"

The question seemed to catch him unexpectedly. A shadow came into his face, already set in a stubborn resentment, touching it now to sulkiness.

"No," he said shortly, sullenly, so that she asked no more, but turned the conversation to other things.

It was three o'clock when they left, a bright clear afternoon at the beginning of November.

"I'd like a walk in the Park," said Elinor. "Are you doing anything? Will you come with me?"

"Yes, I'd like to."

So they crossed the street and walked for an hour in Central Park together, talking little, but stepping briskly in the cold sunshine.

"This is good," he said, suddenly.

"I think New York's good," she answered.

"I've seen damn little of it, really, hanging about Forty-second Street and the theatre district, waiting in managers' offices. It was bloody hot when I got here, too. I used to spend half the day in my bedroom at the Shelton, lying on the bed without a stitch, and taking

cold showers at intervals. Oh, I dare say New York's all right if you're a success, but it's a damned rotten place to be up against it."

His tone jarred her, with its hint of whining and resentfulness, but she felt sorry for him, lonely and unhappy in this city where she was having so good a time. When they came out of the Park and he showed no signs of having any other appointment, she said:

"Will you come back and have tea at my apartment?"

"Oh, you've got a fire!" he cried, as they entered her sitting-room. "How marvellous! I'd almost forgotten what one looked like. I hate all this steam-heat so."

"It does seem like cheating," said Elinor, "to get warm without a fire, doesn't it? Come and help me get the tea."

They had it before the fire, she in a low chair, and he crouching on a stool, hunched up, his head against the blaze which, in the half-dark room, gave to his face a strange, brooding, flame-lit beauty.

"You're lucky, having this place," he said, still with a half-grudging note in his voice. "This is almost the first time I've had tea since I've been here. Tea in front of a fire again! It doesn't seem possible."

When they had finished he carried the tray into the kitchen for her, and then returned to the hearth, where he pulled a pipe from his pocket and, without asking permission, proceeded to light it. He sat smoking in silence for a time, while she lay back watching him, idly, dispassionately, yet somehow touched and amused by his curious, boorish ungraciousness, contrasting with the charm of his looks. He made her feel old, she thought, and very wise and tolerant. Presently he began to talk, not bothering to take the pipe from his mouth, talking at first in snatches and later volubly, with a released flow of speech and intimacy, engendered by the warmth and the darkness and by the fact of her being English, connected with a world he knew, making him feel at home. He talked of his work, his ideals and ambitions, the things that he wanted to do, and meant to do, and

knew that he could do, both in writing and in scene-designing; of the opposition he met with, the impossibility of getting started, of getting anywhere without influence; of his contempt for money and commercial work and the general level of the modern theatre, and the blindness, deafness and insensibility of everyone connected with it. He held forth, heatedly, fiercely, as though fighting imaginary answers and arguments raised against him. Elinor listened quietly, her mind occasionally wandering, saying very little, allowing him to work off and enjoy the angry passion and enthusiasm which consumed him.

Presently one or two people came in for cocktails. He rose as they switched on the light, and withdrew into himself again, standing slightly apart from them, leaning against the mantelpiece, his pipe between his teeth, making no move to help Elinor with the drinks until she called on him to do so. Other people came in and went again, until finally three were left, two men and a woman. Time passed; it was getting on for eight o'clock. Elinor and these friends were going out to dine, but Paul showed no signs of leaving. Finally, one of the men spoke:

"Well, what about going along?" he said; and then turning to Paul, added genially: "We're going to have dinner. Won't you come with us?"

Paul made a faint, formal protest, but admitted to having nothing else to do, and was persuaded to accompany them. They went to Reubens' and ate heartily, Elinor waxing enthusiastic over the food and particularly over the herring salad, and were very jolly and rather noisy. Her friends were a kindly, light-hearted trio of Americans, journalists and Bohemians, whom she had only known since her arrival, yet with whom she felt as completely happy and gaily at ease as though they had been boys and girls together, as indeed they seemed to be this evening. They were equally charming to Paul, drawing him into their circle, treating him, too, as an intimate, as someone they were glad to know and to have among them, never behaving for a moment as though they felt him an appendage of their party,

either by ignoring him or by paying him too pointed attention.

After dinner they all went on to a party somewhere in the West Twenties. "Come and squash down between Marion and me," Elinor said to Paul, as they all got into a taxi. "Park your little fanny in between us."

The party was held in a studio, built on the top of a tall, old private house, a large and beautiful room, with a huge open fireplace where there were logs burning, and many books, and a gramophone, and a great deal of drink—punch in a large, wide bowl, and bottles of gin and rye whisky, ginger-ale and White Rock—and talk, and dancing, and a lot of noise. There were about forty people present, mostly writers and artists, with a sprinkling of actors, painters' models and college professors. Elinor lost sight of Paul in the crowd for a time, but rediscovered him later, seated on a couch, in what appeared to be a moody silence, beside a very beautiful young woman with dark braided hair and the pale, still face of a Madonna. She herself talked largely to her host, whom she had never met before that evening. They danced together, and he took her on to the roof, which looked over to the river, in a clear, cold moonlight. When he left her to preside at the punch-bowl, she sought out Paul and asked him to dance, but he refused, saying that he could not, and presently she was claimed by other men, and saw him return alone to the couch.

It was a quarter-past three when they left, and went on to Childs' and had coffee and buckwheat cakes with some others of the party who had joined them, and stayed there until half-past four, when they separated into two taxis, Paul going one way and Elinor the other.

"I've been an awful bore, I know," he said, as they parted. "Thanks for putting up with me."

On the way home, the Madonna-like woman, who was in Elinor's taxi, said she thought Paul had the most beautiful head that she had ever seen. "But my, isn't he a strain to talk to?" she added.

## XIV

ELINOR saw him again two days later, when he came in unexpectedly for tea.

"You just about saved my life on Sunday," he said. "I had been nearly suicidal with depression the whole morning, and I just couldn't face spending the afternoon and evening alone. That was why I hung on like that. I knew you were going out to dinner with those people and were wondering if I'd never go, and I just stuck, making up my mind I'd come with you, if it were humanly possible."

"Why didn't you say?" asked Elinor.

"Dunno. I just felt obstinate."

"You looked it, my pretty. Damned obstinate. I couldn't invite you, because I was their guest. . . ."

"I realised that, too. Was I bloody rude?"

"No, not rude a bit. A little taciturn, perhaps. Didn't you like them?"

"Oh, you mean after? Yes, I liked them all right; a great deal, really. But by that time I was feeling ashamed and wishing I'd gone home and drowned myself, or anything rather than have forced myself on you as I did. I wanted to leave and hadn't got the courage. Oh, well, I don't suppose I'll ever see any of them again, so if *you'll* forgive me, it doesn't matter."

"*I'll* forgive you," said Elinor, lightly. "But why shouldn't you see them again? You say you don't know anyone in New York—well, here's your chance. Ring up Marion and take her out somewhere, or drop in and see her at cocktail time one day. She's almost always in. I'll give you her address."

"She wouldn't want me," he replied, moodily. "She probably wouldn't remember who I was, or if she did she'd think of me as that rude young man who crashed in on the party the other night."

"Nonsense!" said Elinor, sharply. "Don't talk like that."

"Well, it's true."

"Oh, you make me tired! Did one of those people the other night show in any way that they thought you rude or a nuisance?"

"No; they were too good-mannered."

"Oh, very well," she returned, angrily. "Have it your own way. Go on stewing in your own juice, then, but don't come whining to me about it."

He looked up, ready with some inflamed retort, and then, meeting the anger in her face, subsided.

"All right," he said, gracelessly. "I'll ring her up."

"You needn't do it to oblige me."

She turned from him, exasperated by his moodiness, and there was silence for a moment. Then, in a changed voice, he said:

"I'm sorry."

"All right, forget it."

"I am pretty miserable, though," he went on. "And people *don't* want me. At least, I imagine they don't. After all, why should they? Who am I?"

"An ordinary agreeable young man if you choose to be, and therefore welcome. Why not? If Carl West hadn't wanted to ask you to dinner the other night, believe me he wouldn't have."

"What else could he have done?"

"He could have said, 'Well, we must get along to dinner,' and left it at that. There are a dozen things he could have said."

"Well, *why did* he ask me, then?"

"He asked you because he wanted to. I don't mean that he fell in love with you, or thought you were the most interesting and marvellous person he'd ever met, or anything like that. But he liked you."

"I can't see why. He didn't know anything about me. He hadn't said more than a dozen words to me."

"You know, the trouble with you, my lad, is that you've got a large, swelled head."



"I have? I should have thought it was just the reverse."

"I know you would. You think you're being marvelously modest, but I assure you you're not. You're not content to pass with the multitude. You want to be wanted and flattered and singled out. No, don't be angry," she said quickly, as he turned away from her. "I'm not saying this to hurt or to be beastly, and I expect I don't know you nearly well enough to talk like this, but I happen to like you, and it's something you ought to know about yourself, because it's going to make you unhappy if you don't watch out. I've seen it in you before to-day."

"What?"

"This self-consciousness. A kind of inverted conceit, that comes out in self-depreciation. It's what's commonly called an 'inferiority complex,' I believe."

"I know."

"And it's nothing to be proud of, even though it has got a nice name," she caught him up a little sharply, and then relaxed her tone. "Take life easier; don't think about yourself so much, or what other people are thinking of you. You're all right," she added heartily.

"I wish I thought I was."

"Don't you think you are? A lot better than all right?"

"Yes, I suppose I do. I never imagine other people see it, though."

"Give them credit for a little observation, and be content to get along, that's all. How old are you?"

"Twenty-five. Why?"

"Well, you should have grown out of all that by now. It belongs to seventeen. There, now I've finished, and I apologise for losing my temper. Come and have dinner with me somewhere, and let's go to a theatre."

They spent the evening together. Although his attitude annoyed her, she felt sorry for him; he touched the maternal in her. He seemed, during the evening, to be trying to atone for his earlier behaviour, making himself as charming and agreeable as he could through-

out dinner and in the intervals of the play, which happened to be a very good one. As they drove home in the taxi, he said suddenly:

"You're frightfully decent to me. I'm sorry to have been such a bore. I'll try not to be. Can I come and see you again? Will you have dinner with me one night?"

"Of course. I'd love to."

"Bless you," he said, and then impulsively, surprisingly, kissed her on the cheek. "You're a god-send," he remarked, as he left her at her flat.

He sent her some flowers the next day, with a card inscribed: "From the inferiority complex," and she dined with him a couple of evenings later at a small speakeasy restaurant of his acquaintance, where the food and the so-called "Chablis" were both very bad, and the bill, she imagined from her experience of such places, probably very large.

Very soon he had attached himself to her completely, scarcely a day passing without his seeing or telephoning her. She began to feel responsible for him, as someone she had definitely taken into her life, at any rate for as long as he remained in America; it was as though she had unconsciously adopted him. "It's the penalty of having bullied him, I suppose," she thought, with an amused, half-rueful smile. "I must be careful before giving anyone a dressing-down like that again. It's apt to land them on one's door-step for life. Paul's the type that likes it—the foot-that-kicked licker. Well, it's better than the hand-that-fed biter anyway." All the same, she did not resent his attachment; it pleased her to have him to consider and look after, taking him about with her, introducing him to editors and theatre people who might possibly be of use to him. It occurred to her, though little more than momentarily, that her motives for doing so might be misconstrued, that he might not improbably be taken for her lover—an impression she was not anxious to give, considering the disparity in their ages, and then dismissed the thought. "Oh, hell!" she said to herself, "I can't be bothered. If they think it, they must think it. I've landed myself with this, and

I've got to go through with it. I'm not going to let the kid down just because somebody may suspect me of cradle-snatching."

So she continued to see him and to find herself growing fond of him, a kind of protective tenderness developing in her, mixed with a half-regretful admiration and envy of his fierce enthusiasms, his youthful, strenuous, uncompromising demands of life, and the intensity of his spirits and his resilience, swinging between eager gaiety and excitement and a dark, gloomy depression. She came to learn something about him during these days, of his home and his education, public school and Oxford, and of his parents, both of whom had died during the last two years. He never spoke of his marriage, and, sensing a reluctance, she hesitated to question him about it. Among those to whom she introduced him were Morris and Julia Baird. The former could do nothing for him; he read his play and told Elinor privately that he thought it "bunk," looked at his stage designs and said that they gave him "heebee-jeebees." Paul had done some sketches of settings for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and it was over these, in particular, that Morris waxed indignant.

"Say, if I want a wood," he protested to Elinor, "I want a wood, with trees, see? Not a mountain graveyard that's had an earthquake in it, with a fire-escape going down one side. D'you see his ideas for the costumes of the fairies? Looked like traffic cops gone nancy; blue uniforms with wings. Can you beat it?"

These descriptions were perhaps a little exaggerated, but it was obvious that Paul's ideas and Morris's were little likely to harmonise.

Julia Baird, on the other hand, took him up socially, although she was unable to help him professionally, having little influence with anyone but her husband, and with him mainly in England, because she professed to understand English taste; but she asked him to her parties and employed him as an escort to theatrical first-nights. She had a large and elaborate apartment on Beekman Terrace, where she entertained widely, and was always

surrounded by a number of extremely good-looking young men, who sponged on her for meals and theatre tickets, and usually vanished from her circle after a few months, to be replaced by almost indistinguishable duplicates. She took a great fancy to Paul, and pursued him to the point of embarrassment.

One day, towards the end of November, about three weeks after their first Sunday, Paul and Elinor were lunching together, and he told her that he was changing his hotel, moving from the Shelton, where he had been staying since his arrival, to a much cheaper and smaller one over by Eighth Avenue, an hotel she knew by sight as dingy and sordid-looking; a fact which raised in her mind a question which had long been worrying her.

"Tell me," she said, "what are you living on? What is your financial position? Have you a private income?"

"About enough to keep me in shoes and cigarettes," he answered. "Three hundred a year, to be exact."

"Did your parents leave you no money?"

"Not a cent. We quarrelled when I married. There wasn't much to leave, anyway, but what there was went to a cousin. My three hundred comes from my grandmother."

"And you're living on that, here?" she asked in amazement.

"No. I came into a legacy from an aunt this summer. Five hundred pounds. I'm living on that."

"And when it's gone?"

"I shall go home. I reckoned to do six months on it, decently, but New York's a lot more expensive than I bargained for. If only my play would come on and make me some money, I should be all right."

"You budgeted for that?"

"Not exactly; but it would be a help, as things have turned out. No, I took the five hundred to come over and live on, and I shall make it last as long as I can. That's why I'm moving."

"And when you go back, it's to your own three hundred?"

"Yes."

"What about your wife?"

"Well, she lives on it, too, of course."

"I see." She was silent a moment, and then said, "Tell me about her."

He paused before replying, his eyes fixed on a corner of the restaurant.

"No," he said, surlily. "My marriage was the stupidest thing I've done in my whole life."

"Aren't you happy?"

"Who could be, on three hundred a year?"

"You've no children?"

"Thank God!"

"Why did you marry?"

"Well, I was in love. And I thought I was going to make money. I'd published some verse, and there was the chance of a job going, but it fell through. I did a bit of reviewing odd things; made another hundred a year if I was lucky. You can imagine what it was like. That's why, when I had this windfall and my play looked like being done here, I thought I'd blue it on coming over and see if I couldn't get my foot in in America."

"A bit of a gamble," Elinor commented.

"Yes, I know, but what else was I to do with it? Invest it? Five hundred pounds? Twenty-five pounds a year—a lot of good that is."

"What did your wife say?"

"That I ought to invest it. We had a hell of a row about it, but it was my money, and I came. I couldn't stick waiting around in England any longer. I thought I'd try something new."

"And where is she?"

"With her mother."

"Won't *she* help you?"

"I won't let her. She wouldn't see me when we got married. Audrey used to go and visit her without me. She did everything she could to stop us marrying, just as my own people did. *And* how right they were!"

"You'll go back to her; your wife, I mean?"

"I suppose so."

"She writes to you?"

"No, we've neither of us written since I left. Oh, let's talk of something else. I suppose you think I was a fool and a cad about coming over, too. Well, as it's turned out, it was a rotten bad move, but if the play had come off it wouldn't have been. I haven't given up hope yet."

"Any news?"

"Myers still talks about putting it on. There's a chance there. He's sent it to Paula St. Clair, to see if she'll do it when she gets back from Hollywood. We're waiting for a cable, now."

"And you're just staying on till your five hundred's spent?"

"Well, I don't want to go back beaten."

She mused on this for a few moments. She had read his play and, while it had beauty and a quality of true poetic vision, it had seemed to her entirely uncommercial, impossible of making him the money he hoped from it. When she had hinted as much to him, he had turned faintly angry, and then had begun to contradict himself, saying that it was not money he expected from it, but kudos and recognition and a start in the theatre.

"Was Carl West able to do anything for you?" she asked.

"Told me to send him some stuff; took two poems, at twenty-five dollars each. That's all. An agent bloke I know is bunging my stuff around, poems and stories. He hasn't pulled anything off yet, but he's shown me a most impressive list of papers that have turned them down. I don't believe he's any good. Oh, I'm doing him an injustice. He did get a story into a paper that survived four numbers by never paying for its contributions. I believe the editor's in jail now."

He spoke with a derisive, bitter laugh, and Elinor's heart sank. She had heard this kind of story too often.

"Ponky," she said, "why don't you go back? You're spending far more than you can afford, hanging about here. New York's fiendishly expensive, and you're not living cheap, even though you have moved."

"I've got nearly two hundred pounds left," he said stubbornly.

"Which means you've spent three hundred in three months."

"Well, I had to get some clothes to come over with. They're an investment, anyway."

"Still . . ." she began, but he interrupted her.

"I won't go home," he said violently. "I'll stick it out. Besides, I've got an idea for a new play. I want to tell you about it. Can I?"

Her heart ached for him. He was obstinate, wrong-headed and intolerant, with all the attributes of character which seemed to invite failure, too often resentful of others' success, suspecting motives all round him; yet he had talent and a desperate quality of belief which deserved better than the bludgeoning disappointment they were receiving. She had little belief in undiscovered genius; she did not think of him as that, but she felt that his gifts were of the kind which may, with perseverance, attain recognition, but never popular or financial success, and that he was doomed to struggle always. Fervently she wished that she might be wrong; she knew his nature to be of the type which is improved and not harmed by success, unable to withstand failure, growing bitter and obstinate beneath it. She could visualise him in a few years' time, if this continued, the sneering, jealous, spleenful poet, shabby and down-at-heel, deriding money-makers, obsessed by persecution-mania, reviling critics and reviewers, despising the public; the member of a small circle of embittered kindred failures. Yet she saw no way to help him, reflect on it as she might. The thought of him was constantly in her mind; she was filled with pity for him, pity mingled with tenderness and exasperation, and a curious delight in his beauty, the sensitiveness of his eyes and mouth, the sudden play of laughter, or the dark shadows that moved in them as he sat about her flat, or strummed at the piano, his thoughts far from his hands.

Meanwhile, her play had opened in New York, and inauspiciously. On the first night she had felt the audience

hostile, cold, slow to enthusiasm; the papers next day had been indifferent, finding the piece clumsy, thin and sentimental, although "not without a certain frail charm," and subtly, elliptically impolite to Lois Fane, writing almost entirely of her looks, and leaving her acting a shade too obviously unmentioned. The first week's takings had been bad, and although Morris Baird protested optimism, Elinor felt that anything more than a couple of months' forced run was improbable.

It was a disappointment, but it did not touch her deeply. At home the play was still running successfully and making her money; she had never had any great ambition as a dramatist. Almost coincidentally with the New York opening, her book appeared, and received, in both continents, the kind of notices to which she was accustomed, neither better nor worse than usual; notices from which extracts could very suitably be made for publishers' advertisements. She read them through casually, for the most part doing little more than scan them, surrendering here and there to annoyance at some obtuseness, less frequently moved to gratification, treating the whole thing very much as a matter of accustomed routine.

She had also allowed herself to be persuaded by the attentions of the Lecture Agent, and had begun a series of talks on "The Craft of Fiction," "The Mind of the Novelist" and "Modern English Writers," delivered to women's clubs, starting now in places around New York, and planned to extend after Christmas into the middle West, and eventually to the Pacific Coast. She thought them foolish and trifling, but they brought her money and, so her publishers informed her, acted as good publicity for her novels. Besides this, she was writing articles commissioned by American magazines, enjoying herself at parties, and making more friends than she could comfortably fit into her life.

At the beginning of December Morris Baird sent for her and told her regretfully that her play was losing money. There was, he admitted, a possibility of its



being nursed into success, but it would be an expensive business, and he had decided to cut his losses and withdraw it. He could, he admitted, take it to Chicago, where Lois Fane had a following, but apparently Lois had other plans: wanting him to stage a production of *Romeo and Juliet* for her, opening at Christmas, and this he had decided to do. Elinor exhibited neither surprise nor emotion at the news, and he liked her for it, taking her to lunch at the Ritz and telling her she was a good trouper.

One day early in December Elinor went out to New Jersey, to lecture at a suburb about an hour's journey from New York. It was a wet, chilly morning and, despite her fur coat and the zippers she had bought, she shivered and felt blue, and loathed the slow, stopping train which finally reached her destination at half-past twelve, when she was met by a bright, agreeable, earnest woman, the Chairman of the Programme Committee, who was standing on the platform looking for her, holding in her hand a copy of Elinor's lecture folder, with her photograph on the outside, the better to identify her among the two other women who descended from the train. She had her car waiting, and drove her home, through the wet, new suburb, to luncheon, at which her mother was present, another brisk, active club woman, who looked little older than her daughter. Elinor was used to these lunches, where there was always the same talk, the same furniture, the same good simple food, and usually the same mother.

After luncheon came a brief chat over coffee, turning on the current New York plays and the local play-reading centre, where the ladies of the suburb "studied" a play each fortnight and discussed it on alternate Thursday evenings; on the latest choice of the Book of the Month Club; the activities of the institution to which she was to speak, and a list of the names of previous celebrities who had addressed it. Elinor had heard these names before; they were always the same names, a procession which preceded her in all her lectures; men and women who, for her, had no existence beyond their signatures

above her own in the guest-book, seeming to her a series of literary Mrs. Harrises. They had, for the most part, written large popular works on unpopular subjects: relativity, philosophy, comparative religion, astronomy, and psychology, conveniently and profitably reduced to the limits of eight hundred pages in a five-dollar edition; and there was also a very young English playwright, a very old American critic, and a college boy who had travelled round the world on fifty dollars and was now earning two hundred and fifty a time in relating it.

At a quarter to three she was driven to the Club-house, a modern attractive building, at which a large audience of women was arriving and leaving umbrellas and galoshes in the cloak-room. Here her hostess parted from her, handing her over to the President, who introduced her to the Chairman, the Treasurer and the Secretary, and then led her to the platform, where she sat facing a couple of hundred women while the minutes of the last meeting were read, and the President gave out notices like a headmistress, making an earnest appeal for getting together to do something about something. There followed a moment's pause, while the audience shuffled and settled into seats, and the President began again, saying how fortunate they were to have secured Miss Johnson to come and speak to them that afternoon, and how she needed no introduction, being already so well known to them as the authoress of those delightful works—here she looked hastily at a paper in her hand, and read the names of three of Elinor's novels. "Miss Johnson," she began, clearing her throat and starting again in a slightly higher key, "is an Englishwoman who has come over to this country . . ." Elinor recognised the opening, taken straight from her lecture folder, her agents' puff preliminary, copied down by the President and delivered now as her own composition. She had heard it a great many times, knew it almost by heart, and had always to restrain herself from prompting when the introducer broke down and had to refresh her memory from notes. "She will speak to us this after-

noon on . . .," this was always a pause, the one thing that Presidents could never remember, "the Craft of Fiction. Miss Elinor Johnson."

Elinor rose and delivered her lecture, rapidly, efficiently, speaking for fifty minutes, talking plain sense, little removed, she felt, from platitude. But platitude, she had found, went down excellently, especially when brightened by her flood of anecdote and reminiscence, not always perhaps tactful, but certainly amusing. After she left the platform there was tea, the usual stand-up tea, at which she never ate anything so as to save trouble, and introductions and congratulations and handshakings. "That was a delightful talk, Miss Johnson. There are so many of our members who try to write in their own modest way. I'm sure it will be of the greatest help to them." "May I be permitted to tell you what very real pleasure your books have given me and my daughters, Miss Johnson? My eldest daughter is that blonde lady over there, in the purple hat. May I bring her over and present her to you?" "I haven't seen your play yet, Miss Johnson, but I'm going just as soon as ever I get a chance." "We had a country-woman of yours out here to talk to us last winter. Perhaps you know her? Emily Matheson, who wrote *Widening Circles*. Now I wanted to ask you, Miss Johnson, do you consider that an accurate picture of English social life?" One after another they pressed round her, and her mouth began to ache from a set, mechanical smile. "Might I ask a great favour of you, Miss Johnson? Would you be so very kind as to autograph a copy of your book for a very dear friend of mine who's bed-ridden and couldn't be here to-day?" "I would so much have liked you to meet Mrs. Sallinger, the President of our Library Committee, but, unfortunately, she had to go and visit her sister in Grand Rapids."

At last she got away, her hostess driving her to the station.

"That was a perfectly lovely talk, Miss Johnson. I heard quite a number of our members saying it was the best talk they could remember since the Club was opened."

She bought *The American Mercury* and a bag of salted pea-nuts to comfort her on the train. The weather had cleared during the afternoon, and she decided to take the ferry, for the joy of seeing down-town New York from the river, with the seemingly baseless forms of the great buildings, at first only towering rows of lighted windows, emerging from the darkness into outline, a city of commercial enchantment.

It was a quarter-past six when she reached her flat, and found a note from Paul pushed under the door, apparently delivered by hand:

"I'm off to see Myers at 4.30" [he had scribbled]. "He telephoned while I was out this morning, and when I rang up I got a message he wanted to see me. Hope to God it may mean something! Suppose he's going to do the play! Suppose Paula St. Clair likes it! Oh, hell! Going on to tea with Julia afterwards. Will try and look in by seven. All excited,  
Paul."

She also found a packet of English mail awaiting her, and read it while she changed and had her bath, dropping it in bits all over the floor as she went from room to room. There was a long letter from Nancy, which she tried to read as she lay in the water, but her fingers got wet and the ink ran, so that she abandoned the attempt and put the paper in front of the fire to dry. She waited for Paul until ten minutes past seven, but he did not come, and she was due to dine at the Colony at a quarter past, and then go on to the theatre.

After the play that evening she went with her friends to a speakeasy which the writing and theatrical crowd of New York were in the habit of frequenting late at night. She stood at the foot of the area steps, shivering with cold, her cloak drawn tightly around her and her hair blowing about her face, as they waited for the proprietor's eye to appear at the wicket in the door, and approve them. Inside, it was hot and noisy and full of smoke, a passage, filled entirely with men's hats and coats, opened into a long, narrow room, badly lit, and

unfurnished except by bare tables and chairs. From this one went into a large back kitchen, which was the bar, and reserved for the more illustrious habitués. There were about thirty people present, a few in evening-dress, but for the most part wearing day clothes, sitting in groups of fours and sixes. To Elinor it suggested a bad studio party in a Bloomsbury cellar before the fun had started. She sat with her friends in a tiny square space between the long room and the kitchen, squashed on a bench against the wall, and was asked what she would like to drink.

"What can I have?"

"Anything. Scotch, gin, wine, liqueurs, Tom Collins. You've only got to say."

"I'll have Scotch, then, thanks. Could I have a sandwich or something with it? I'm hungry."

"Sorry, lady," the waiter replied; "only drinks here."

She began to look about her, but it was hard at first to distinguish faces in the obscurity. A noisy group at a table opposite were relating each other's witticisms. "Did you hear what Sarah said at Carl West's party the other night?" "Go on, Tom, tell them the one you pulled at the opera last Friday." "Did Dinah tell you Ben's line about the Theatre Guild?" They none of them seemed to be listening to each other, but only waiting for the moment when they themselves could speak. She recognised one of the women at the table and waved to her; the woman waved back and shouted something indistinguishable above the din. In a corner between them and the wall a young man was sitting alone, with a glass of whisky before him, his head bent, apparently sunk in depression. Elinor peered through the smoky darkness at him. It was Paul.

"Paul!" she called to him. "Ponky!"

He did not hear her, and she raised her voice.

He lifted his head, a sort of stupefied look in his eyes, and registered surprise at seeing her.

"Come over here!" He came and joined them, and she introduced him to her friends. "Fetch your drink.

Come and sit with us. What have you been doing with your little self this evening? "

He brought his glass across, and squeezed in beside her. The waiter brought the drinks for the party.

"Finish that and have another," said the host. Paul complied. He was looking very miserable, his hair straggling untidily on his forehead. Elinor straightened it for him.

"What's the matter, Ponky?" she asked lightly "Bit tight?"

"I wish to God I were!"

"What's the trouble? What did Myers say?"

"N.B.G." He shook his head wretchedly. "I'll tell you later. I want to talk to you."

Once or twice during the next hour he tugged at her sleeve as an indication that he wanted to go. She pretended to take no notice. His appearance worried her; she wanted to talk to him, but she was the guest of her friends, and must sit there a while longer.

"Not much longer," she whispered, taking advantage of a group stopping by their table to talk on its way out. "Be a good boy, and try to stick it."

At last she murmured something about bed.

"One more round first, then," said her host.

"No, really, Steve."

But he was insistent.

"Come on. Just one more. What about you, sonny?"

The extra round took up another half-hour. Elinor felt Paul fidgeting beside her, but she would not look at him. She knew that she must appear callous, sitting there, her elbows on the table, chatting gaily, listening with a smile to her host's stories, but she had no alternative. She hoped the others would not notice him.

At last they left. He walked back to her flat with her.

"Now, what is it?" she asked.

"I'll tell you when we get in. I can come up, can't I?"

"Sure."

"I thought you were never going to go. Sitting there grinning while that ass told bawdy stories."

"Honey, I couldn't help it. Have you been alone all evening? What have you been doing?"

"I went to a movie."

"Where did you have dinner?"

"I didn't."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I didn't want any. I couldn't think of anywhere to go."

"Are you hungry?"

"I am, rather."

"So am I. There's bound to be some food in the flat; would you rather go on to Childs?"

"No, let's go home."

There was a gleam of fire left in the sitting-room when they entered.

"You have a go at that," said Elinor, "while I see what's in the frigidaire."

She returned presently with a tray. He had coaxed a blaze in the grate, and was standing reading a Press-cutting.

"What's that?" she asked.

"I found it on the floor," he said, and handed it to her. "Look."

She took it from him, and read:

"At the end of the six weeks' opera season which terminated at the Sovereign Theatre last Saturday, there was one person who did not take a call, modestly preferring to remain in the background, although it was due almost entirely to her energies and enthusiasm that the public has had this opportunity of hearing again the charming airs and melodies so dear to the ears of our fathers and grandfathers. I refer, of course, to that celebrated and attractive hostess, so well known to all lovers of art and music, Mrs. Hermione Van Leer. Mrs. Van Leer, who is tall and slender, with large blue eyes, has in her home, in Chelsea, a wonderful black velvet and silver boudoir designed by the Hon. Hamish Sotherington, who was, of course, also responsible for the delightful settings of the operas themselves."

"Well, well, well!" said Elinor. "Isn't Hermione marvellous? It must have dropped out of her letter."

"So it's come to an end, has it? Well, I'm damned glad. I hope they've lost a lot of money."

"Hermione has done rather well out of it, as a matter of fact. I don't only mean Press-cuttings and publicity, but she's got a job to come over and decorate a house in Chicago."

"Strewth!"

"There was a long cutting about that, too. Apparently the strain of conducting every night, was too much for Norman, and he's broken down, so they're making that and Hermione's departure the excuse for closing, with a vague promise of re-opening later."

"Likely," said Paul. "When's she coming over?"

"In time for Christmas, she says. Ham Sotherington's coming with her."

"That *will* be nice."

"Apparently it's a marvellous job, and going to make her a fortune."

"How did she get it?"

"Darling, you know Hermione. Come and help me in the kitchen."

"Now tell me all about it, Ponky," she said, as they sat down to the meal. "What's been happening? Bad news from Myers, eh?"

"Wash out," he replied. "Paula St. Clair doesn't like it, and he's very sorry, and hopes I'll let him see my next play, and I've got the script back, and that's that."

"How rotten!" she said, sympathetically.

"And that's the last hope gone west. I heard from Ad. Wolff yesterday. Back to the bloody beginning again."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I," he said, bitterly. "Then I went on to tea with Julia Baird, and like a damn fool told her all my troubles."

"Why like a damn fool?"

"Because it made her sympathetic. My God, I wish I hadn't."

"What do you mean?"



He hesitated a moment.

"Well, I suppose it isn't the kind of thing one says, but I rather gather she's well known for it."

"What?" Elinor asked, mystified, and then was suddenly enlightened. "Do you mean she made love to you?"

"Well . . . bluntly, yes."

"Oh, tell me!" she cried, joyously.

"No; it was disgusting."

"Oh, Ponky, you can't stop there! I know it's indecent of me, but you *have* made me curious. Julia, of all people! What did she do to you? Tell Elinor."

"She was revolting!" Again he stopped.

"Was this the first time?"

"Yes. No. At least . . . oh, never mind."

"Paul, you can't begin a story like that, and then stop," she gurgled.

"It's nothing to laugh at," he said, angrily. "I tell you it was beastly. Oh, I suppose I've only got myself to blame. She's been messing me about for a long time."

"Paul!" It was Elinor's turn to be revolted.

"Well, there you are. It's been awkward enough before now, but never anything like to-night. I can't ever go back there."

"You don't like her?"

"Like her? Like her?" he laughed contemptuously. "Have you ever looked at her? I'd sooner go to bed with a screw-driver."

"Is that what she wanted?"

"Well, of course. It was like being vamped by a vulture. I thought I should never get out alive."

"My poorkins! What did you do?"

"Pretended not to understand, of course. Went all innocent. I know now what girls feel like when old men try to rape them."

"Aren't women awful?" said Elinor. "You *did* get away, I suppose?"

"I got away . . . somehow. Oh, don't let's talk about it. I still feel sick when I think of it."

When they had finished supper, she drew an arm-

chair to the fire, seating herself in it, and he sprawled on the floor at her feet.

"You have had a day, my Ponky," she said.

"I got back here at a quarter past seven. Ran all the way from Julia's. I couldn't get a taxi. When I found you'd gone out, I felt like suicide. I went and sat in a bloody movie, called here about eleven, and then went over to Jimmy's. I never expected to see you there."

"What are you going to do now? Send the play out again?"

"I suppose so. I don't believe it's got a chance any more, though. I was building everything on Myers."

"How's the new play going?"

"I'm stuck. I can't work here, anyway, in a beastly hotel bedroom."

"Darling, why not go home?" she said suddenly.

"Your agent can send the play round. You're only wasting money and making yourself miserable, staying here. Why not go back?"

"And admit I was wrong?"

"Darling, that's silly. You weren't wrong; it's not a question of that."

"That's all you know."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't know the rows there were. You don't know the things that were said."

"By your wife?"

Again that long pause, as always before he would speak of her.

"Yes. And by me."

"Yes, but all the same, you can't stand out for that. It's silly. Things have gone badly . . ."

"As she said they would," he interrupted.

"Well, does that matter? It's annoying, I know . . ."

"Annoying!" he mocked her word. "To have 'I told you so' jeered at you?"

"Paul, you make me tired. You can't stay away for ever. When your money's gone you've got to go back . . ."

"Thanks for reminding me."

"Oh, very well," she said, really angry now. "Have it your own way."

She turned in her chair impatiently, exasperated by his sulkiness and pettishness, but he scrambled to his knees.

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. Don't be angry with me," he pleaded.

"Well, really . . ."

"Yes, I know," he laid his hand on her knee. "I know I was beastly. I'm sorry, only I've had such a bloody day. Forgive me."

"All right." She relented.

"I'm so wretched. It's all such a hopeless failure. I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know what's going to become of me."

"Don't talk like that."

"It's true. Four years now . . . ever since I came down from the 'Varsity. And what have I done? What have I got to show for it?"

"It'll be all right," she said, soothingly.

"How? How? Haven't I gone on saying that to myself all the time? Oh, I've made such a mess of everything. It's no good; I'm no good. I know it."

Suddenly he fell forward, with his head against his arm on her knees, and was weeping, all the weak strength and sullen obstinacy gone out of him.

"Paul, don't!" She was shocked at this collapse.

"Don't, darling. Don't."

"Oh, God, I'm so miserable."

She wanted to scold him, to bully him back to self-respect, but found that she could not. She was too sorry for him, too touched by this surrender, this sudden breakdown of all that he had built up by way of pride, yielded now to the sobbing of a child, beaten and humbled, in her lap. She wanted to take him in her arms and mother him. Tenderness awoke in her. Mechanically, she began to stroke his hair, and to make soft, kindly murmurings, quietening him.

"Ssh! It's all right. Don't cry. It's all right."

But her gentleness seemed only to encourage him to

further weeping, easing the passage of his tears. He lay there, his head buried on his arm, making little stifled sounds for a long while, and then his hand went out, searching for her hand, which he drew down to his face, turning his head and laying his cheek against it, kissing it. By degrees his crying ceased, and he shifted himself, raising his head, searching for his handkerchief, using it quickly; then he lay back again, with his head on her knees, still holding her hand against his face, staring into the fire. Neither of them spoke. Elinor remained still, her disengaged hand moving gently among the softness of his hair.

"Dear Elinor," he whispered at last. "You are good to me. I do thank God for you. You don't know what it is to have someone . . . someone you needn't mind letting go with." Again he drew her hand to his lips. "I've been so horribly lonely. There's been nobody but you . . . nobody I could talk to . . . nobody who cared. Dear Elinor, I do love you."

"Paul dear," she murmured.

He turned, looking up at her, his eyes, dark and shining, gazing into hers. The light from the fire and from the rose-shaded lamp on the supper-table across the room touched his features in the darkness, deepening the shadows below his eyes and in the hollows of his cheeks. As he raised himself he brought his mouth close to hers, kissing her gently, lifting himself until he knelt upright, taking her in his arms, his fingers moving on her face.

"Dear Elinor," he whispered again, and laid his head against her breasts. She held him there, listening to his breathing, in counter-rhythm to her own, and then again he raised his face and kissed her, but this time his kiss lingered, begging an answering kiss, while his body straightened, growing taut and possessive in her arms. She kissed him gently and released herself, patting him quietly and rising from her chair.

"Now what about a little drink?" she said, with a laugh that was meant to be light and unconcerned, but had a hint of fear in it. His kiss had stirred her, surpris-

ingly, against her will; there was danger in it and in the darkened room and the fire-light. She went to the wall-switch by the door and put out her hand, but he stopped her.

"Don't," he said. "Don't put on the light. It's nice like this. Let's stay as we are."

She came back to the table and took up the bottle of whisky. He was standing now, straightening his clothes, tumbled from lying and kneeling, arranging his collar and his tie, smoothing down his hair.

"Like that?" she said, holding up his glass.

He took it from her and started to move about the room, while she poured her own drink. He came to rest by the piano, turning over the music that lay upon it, and then sat down on the stool and began to play, softly and idly, a Chopin prelude. She stood beside him, listening, her eyes resting on the line of his throat as he sat, his head raised, his eyes narrowing, trying to remember the notes. He stopped in the middle of a phrase.

"I can't remember any more," he said, and put out his hand, taking hers, drawing her down on to the seat beside him. She put her glass on the piano, and then took his face in her hands, smiling at him.

"Listen, my Ponky," she said. "Have you any idea of the time?"

"None," he answered. "It's late. That's all I know."

"It's a quarter to three," she told him. "Time for good little boys to be in bed."

"That's early for this city." He turned back to the piano. She looked at him narrowly, and then rose and went to the fire, where he followed her.

"You're not angry with me?" he asked.

"Of course not. Only you're a very tired boy, and I think you ought to go to beddy-byes."

"Must I?" he asked.

"I think so, darling." She came towards him. "Say good-night to me."

He put his arms round her and kissed her.

"I don't want to go," he whispered. "Let me stay here."

She released herself.

"Darling, you can't," she said.

"Yes, let me stay. Elinor,"—he caught her by the hand—"don't send me away. It's been such a marvellous evening. I don't want to go back to my filthy hotel and spoil it. Let me stay here with you."

"No, darling." She spoke quickly, anxious to have him gone.

"Yes. Please. Please, Elinor. I want to . . . so badly. You've been so wonderful to me. You don't know what it's meant. Don't turn me away." He took her in his arms again. "Elinor darling, I love you. Let me stay. Let me stay. Elinor!"

She felt his breath on her lips, his face against her own.

"Do you really want to?" she whispered, yielding.

"My dear!"

He looked into her eyes, and she smiled, nodding her head.

"All right, then," she said, and this time it was she who put her arms around his neck, and laid her mouth against his, kissing him, her hands caressing his head, while he held her close to him.

"My darling," he whispered. "My darling."

## XV

SHE awoke early in the morning and lay watching him asleep beside her, his face turned towards her, marking the long curving eyelashes lying on his cheek, the dark hair tumbled on his forehead, and the lips slightly parted, seeing these things with delight in them, yet with a remote sense of guilt at his youth. Lying like that he looked little more than a boy, a handsome stripling not yet come to manhood, and she felt conscious suddenly of the light of morning unkindly on herself. He stirred slightly as she watched him, as though drowsily aware of her scrutiny, half opened his eyes and moved towards her, twisting his fingers in hers, laying his head against her shoulder and settling again to sleep.

But, to her, sleep did not come. She lay still, her mind going back over the past evening. Had she done wrong to let him stay? It had seemed so small a thing, to give him comfort, to keep him by her. Did his youth make it a fault in her? He was twenty-five, and not a boy; it had been no seduction on her part, but a willing, kindly submission to his desire to stay with her; a gesture of tenderness from them both, tenderness that overcame her still as she looked at him, and felt his hand in hers, loosened now in sleep. Yet there had been that moment, the moment of his kiss, when she had sensed danger; danger of what? Of her caring too deeply, or of his? She did not know. For him, looking back now on all that had passed, remembering how he had come to her in the darkness, taking her to him with a gentleness that had been the seeking of comfort and shelter, she felt little fear. For herself, the danger was her own, and inconsiderable. So long as she could keep this an interlude merely, a brief interlude of happiness in the dark patch of his life for him, and a snatched fragment of

beauty in the current of her own for her, all would be well. It could not endure, in any case. In less than a month she must set out on her tour; soon, too, whatever he said, he must return to England and his wife, the wife of whom he was so loth to speak. She knew nothing about her, beyond that he had quarrelled with her, that her memory brought a shadow to his eyes, that he was unwilling to return to her. She visualised a hard, bright studio-girl, sulkily beautiful, jeering at his failure, pointing out others' successes: "Why aren't you like So-and-so? Look how he's getting on"; revolting against poverty and housework in the tiny, squalid flat he had sketchily described; greeting his return with a cold: "What did I tell you?" rubbing in the wasted legacy. . . .

Surely, surely, she had nothing with which to reproach herself, for she realised that the reproach, if any there was, must be hers, she who was so much older, older in years and in experience? A speech from *Candida* came to her mind: "*My goodness and purity? I would give them both to him as willingly as I would give my shawl to a beggar dying of cold.*" No, that was dramatising herself; she must admit the urgency of her own joy in him, ranking with his need. A physical joy; was it that merely? That, and a tenderness, a maternal pity and gentleness that had stirred her. It was for her to maintain this where it stood, not to let it bring him sadness, but only pleasure; a brief oasis, since it could be no more.

The travelling-clock beside the bed pointed to a quarter to eight. Gently she awakened him.

"Darling," she said, "I'm afraid you must get up. Sabina comes at half-past eight."

"Sabina?" He blinked at her sleepily.

"The coloured lady."

"Oh!" He yawned, stretching himself.

"You can come back to breakfast if you like. You'd better go out and get a shave."

"Yes." He rubbed his chin. "Can I have a bath?"

"Of course."

"Just five minutes more."



He drew her to him, snuggling his head on her breast, with lazy happiness. She bent and kissed his lids.

"Dear Elinor," he grunted.

A few days later she came to him eagerly.

"Listen, Ponky," she said. "Do you read French?"

"Yes, a bit. Why?"

"I've got a play here that Carl West gave me. It's probably going to be done next season. They're looking for some one to make a version. What about having a go at it? Read it, anyway."

"Do you think they'd let me?" he asked her, when he returned the manuscript. "I'd love to have a shot."

"Go and see Carl. He knows all about it. I suggested you to him when he showed me the play. I'm sure he'd let you try."

"I wish to God he would. I believe I could do it. It wants careful handling, but it's my sort of stuff."

"Well, ring up Carl and talk to him."

The next day he told her in high excitement that he had signed a contract for the adaptation, and waved a cheque for two hundred and fifty dollars in the air.

"You are a marvel, Elinor," he said. "God bless you, and bless you, and bless you, and bless you, and bless you!"

"Don't mention it," she laughed.

But she was thankful that this had happened. It saved his self-esteem, giving him a reason for staying a few more weeks in America. She had worked hard to bring it about, pulling wires, flattering and persisting for his sake, as she could never have done for herself.

The effect on Paul was remarkable. It restored him to self-confidence, turning him to a gayer, more assured being than she had ever known him; his hang-dog gloom and his air of always skulking in corners deserted him. She found him, indeed, during the ensuing weeks, far more charming and companionable than she had believed possible. She no longer had regrets or scruples for their position; as a lover, he came to her no longer like a child stumbling and groping in the darkness, but

with a light, tender, glad companionship, laughing with her, playing with her, yet with a new independence of her, in which she delighted. She had less need now to feel responsible for him, to wonder when he left her how surliness and misery were sitting on his brow; no need to think of him always as a lonely orphan to whom she gave shelter. She rejoiced in their relationship, in this new freedom and vitality that it seemed to give him, and, for herself, grew daily fonder of him, discovering in him unexpected sweetnesses and moments of thoughtfulness, until the prospect of their approaching separation with her own departure became something she refused to face, realising how much she would miss him, how much she seemed to have drawn from their intimacy, and how large a blank, however temporary, their parting would make in her life. It was a realisation with which she did not like being confronted. When the time came, she would meet it; until then she would enjoy the present.

The only thing which occurred to mar their harmony was the arrival of Hermione, whom Paul was unwilling to meet. He passed her once in the street, and she cut him, or did not recognise him; later, he met her by accident in Elinor's flat, and a re-introduction was performed. They acquitted themselves politely, but without cordiality.

Hermione was agog with excitement over her job in Chicago. She could talk of little else, and dismissed the memory of the opera season with vague gestures as something unimportant and forgotten.

"How's Norman?" Elinor asked.

"Oh, he's all right again. As a matter of fact, he's in Antwerp."

"Whatever for?"

"They're doing *Old Peterkin* at the Flemish opera. I don't know why. It was a terrible flop in London. I knew it would be, but we had to do one of Norman's, and it's better than the rest. Have you ever heard *The Jester and the Rose*? Tell me, darling, how's your play?"

"It's closing," said Elinor.

"Why, isn't it a success?" she asked, naïvely.

"No, I don't think it is," Elinor laughed.

"Oh, darling, how disappointing! And you did think that over here, at least, it would be decently done, didn't you?"

This was the kind of remark which had earned Hermione the reputation for being spiteful, implying, as it did, that the London production had been a makeshift, and not worth considering. Elinor, however, alone perhaps, knew that when Hermoine said things like that she was being perfectly honest, speaking without thinking. It was only when she was talking to someone from whom she had anything to gain or fear that she dissembled. She had been, Elinor knew, more than a little jealous of the play's success in London, had succeeded in convincing herself that it was a bad production, and had forgotten now that she had not genuinely considered it so at the time. Elinor understood the workings of her not too honest mind down to their last ramification, far better indeed than Hermione did, since she was always deceiving herself, covering her motives from her own consciousness. She knew now that Hermione would be very sweet and sympathetic towards her, and would tell everyone in New York what a good play it really was, and how popular in London, and knew, too, how different would have been her attitude had she found the play a success. Another's triumph was the one thing that Hermione could not bear, but she would always champion failure.

"I can just see the letters she'll write back to Nancy and Cynthia, being all sweet about it," Elinor said to Paul, to whom, perhaps unwisely, she had retailed the conversation. "'Poor dear Elinor's play hasn't had much success in America. It really is a shame. She does deserve better luck.'"

"Bitch!" was all Paul's comment.

Hermione gave her all the gossip from London, supplying details where Elinor had already been acquainted with the facts by letter. Richard had taken Brenda to Egypt for the winter; Nancy was taking fencing

lessons, for the good of her figure; Cynthia was interesting herself in a newly opened restaurant.

"And Winkie? That baby's going to be like the one in *Anna Karenina*, that takes five hundred pages to arrive."

"This one's going to take a lot more than five hundred pages. Didn't you know there ain't going to be no baby?"

"What?"

"No, darling. At least I don't think so. Poor Winkie has been going about at parties singing: 'Bye and bye, I'se going to lay down my heavy load' ever since the summer, and then she found it was another mistake, poor lamb. I don't believe she *can*. She's nearly given up hope, but she protests she won't take a lover till she's sure. She says she believes in giving Goronwy every chance."

For the first few days after her arrival, Elinor saw Hermione constantly; after that, she began to make friends, and they met less frequently. She left New York on Boxing Day without saying good-bye, sending a telegram from the train, reading: "See you in Chicago. Love, Hermione."

Elinor herself left for her lecture tour on New Year's Day. She spent New Year's Eve at a series of parties, to which Paul accompanied her, ending up with breakfast in an apartment on the top of the Savoy Plaza. It was a quarter to seven when they left, walking back to Elinor's flat. In the last few days snow had fallen; this morning the city was white and still, Fifth Avenue stretching long and silent, straight and clean as a ruler, before them. New York had never looked so beautiful. They stood at the corner of Fifty-fourth Street, empty to the eye, the sky still a deep night-green to the west, and then they turned, looking down it towards the East River, where the sky was flushed with red, so that they seemed to be standing on the very threshold of the morning.

"Come, let's walk," said Elinor. "We can't possibly go in, with it looking like this."

They walked for nearly an hour in the streets, with the day awakening round them, the first reluctant noises beginning, carts appearing and life stirring gradually, while the flush of rose in the east spread until the whole sky was a flooded stretch of colour, flame and gold and blue, like a proud and lovely banner. The Ritz tower stood tall and graceful against the young brightness of the morning.

Paul slipped his arm through Elinor's as they stood looking at it. There were tears in her eyes, and he noticed them.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"It's too damned beautiful," she gulped. His arm went round her shoulders, and they stood a long while in silence. The colour began to fade.

"Let's go," she said, abruptly.

It was not until they were back in her flat that they spoke again. There they became conscious of their clothes, she still in evening-dress and he in a dinner-jacket, of having been up all night, and of all the preparations needed for her departure that afternoon. They came back to earth with a jar.

"You go home and change, honey," she said. "I'll have a bath and do a bit of packing, and I'll get Sabina to have some nice hot coffee ready for you in half an hour. Or do you want to go to bed?"

"No. I want to stay with you, till you go. I'll change and shave and be right back."

"Sabina can get us some lunch here. Then we can go straight to the train. Bless you, my poppet."

"Ponky," she said, later in the morning, while Sabina was busy with a piece of steak in the kitchen, "we haven't talked. I don't know that there's really any need. But you'll probably be gone when I get back."

"I wish you weren't going."

"Honey, so do I. But everything's got to come to an end. You're quite happy now, aren't you?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Listen," she said. "You've got to be. Don't let me

have to go away worrying about you. You've got the play to translate. That'll keep you busy for a bit. You haven't booked a passage?"

"There's no hurry this time of year."

"Well, listen, darling. I don't want any good-bye scenes. We've had a lovely time."

"I'll see you in London."

"Perhaps. But that'll be different. If we meet in London we meet as friends. The other thing's over. It's been grand and lovely and amusing, and this is just the way it ought to end. And you're not going to be unhappy about it, are you?"

"I'm going to miss you like hell."

"So am I, sweet. But that can't be helped. You're not going to mind going back now, are you?"

"I'm not looking forward to it. I haven't thought about it."

"Well, you're going with a nice little job of work done, and you've got the new play to get on with."

"Elinor, has this got to be the end?"

"Honey, you know it has. We never meant it to last. It's just been something we've had. I've been terribly happy . . ."

"So have I."

"Well, that's all that matters, then. It's just been something gay and lovely that we've found, and kept all to ourselves. It doesn't come into our lives. It doesn't touch them. You're going back to England to be happy and successful, and this is just going to be something in the past. Eh?"

He came over to her, and knelt at her feet.

"Elinor, I love you," he said.

"Ssh!" She laid her hand on his lips. "Don't say things like that. Just say you're glad it's been, and that you're not going to worry about it, and that you'll be a good boy. And kiss me. See?"

He kissed her long and greedily, so that she had to put him from her.

"That's enough," she said.

"I do love you, all the same," he whispered.

For answer, she made a face at him, and Sabina brought in the lunch.

He took her to the station, bought her papers and put her on the train. They began to walk up and down the platform.

"Don't wait, darling," she said. "We've neither of us got anything to say, and I hate farewells. You'd much better run along."

"All right," he said, and then put his arms round her, kissed her and went.

Elinor took her seat in the parlor-car. Boys with newspapers, nuts and candy came up and down. A Western Union Telegraph messenger paraded the train. On an impulse she summoned him, and scribbled a telegram to Paul, which should await him when he returned to his hotel: "*Good-bye lovings Elinor.*" Then she sat, staring at the window, with a sick emptiness in her heart, tears beginning to come into her eyes and trickle gently on her face. She was in love; she loved Paul. She had not thought that it would come to this; the thing had taken her unawares, but she had known it that morning, standing with him watching the sunrise. She was desolated by this parting. She did not believe that he loved her, his protestations had been affection, tenderness; she had tried to teach him independence, to give him, with her body, and by all that she had done for him, a sense of manhood and command and self-reliance which he had lacked, coming to her as an unhappy, disillusioned boy, and she believed that she had succeeded. So much the better, then. The pain of parting was hers alone, and he would not suffer. That was as it should be. If one of them was to pay for this interlude, it must be she, since hers was the responsibility. He would miss her, perhaps, but no more. She was glad of that.

It was easy to say, less easy to believe, down to the heart of her. Yet she believed it, unselfish in her loving. Presently she would put it from her, forget it, relegate it to all the other jettison of the past, but not yet—not quite yet. For a little while she must dwell on it, linger-

ingly, tenderly, regretfully, wounding herself with it, relishing her pain. She thought of him for the whole of her six hours' journey, recalling his face, his voice, and things that he had said, re-living that first evening of their loving, the tears still running from her eyes, but fitfully, her chair turned so that no one in the car could see her face.

He wrote to her. His first letter, started immediately on receipt of her telegram, was tender, despondent, the letter of a lover. She left it unanswered. When he wrote again, it was more gaily, telling her of his movements, his work, the people he had seen, telling her that he missed her; and her replies were light, careless, full of trifling details, descriptions of her audiences and of things that she saw, with no word of love in them, no hint of the past. She refrained, even, from saying that she, too, missed him, as she would have done had he been a friend merely. Her letters were models of emotional emptiness.

Three weeks passed. She had spoken in a dozen cities, spent nights on trains, doubling on her tracks; and faced journalists, club-women and audiences—so many that already they were becoming a jumbled blur in her head. She had been taken over the Ford plant in Detroit, shown Niagara, and Harvard and Yale, watched a football game, and an ice-hockey match, graceful, swift and exciting, and attended a function known as a "Book Fair" in a large department store in Pittsburgh, where authors sat behind tables stacked with their works, and met their public face to face, signing a hundred copies of their books in the course of an afternoon.

She came to Chicago, penetratingly cold, and compounded of cramped hideousness and spacious, startling beauty. She refused an invitation to visit the Stockyards; she went to the Art Gallery, amazed at its treasures; she fell in love with the sweep of Lake Shore Drive and the churned, frozen surface of the water; the wide, incomplete magnificence of Michigan Boulevard; the tall, aspiring Wrigley Building, clear cut against a glittering gold



morning of frost and blue sky; all the new beauty of size and line and sharpness which America has invented and made its triumph.

It was here that she received a letter from Paul, telling her that his translation had been accepted, and that he was sailing for home on the 1st of February. He telephoned her from New York, at midnight, to say good-bye, and she found the experience strangely disquieting, to hear his voice, which brought him as vividly before her as though he were in the room, to grasp for words, struggle to think what she would say, as though she were battling against a swiftly moving current of time, and then, with a brief click, to feel him transported, carried away from her a thousand miles, herself again in isolation. She managed, however, to talk gaily, to reproach him for extravagance, laugh with him and bid him a light farewell; but when she replaced the receiver, she felt strained and curiously spent. He had come so briefly, tantalisingly near, re-awakening the love in her that she had been striving to forget, and she wept a little before she went to sleep.

Next morning she sent him a telegram to the boat. After four days in Chicago her tour began again: Cincinnati, Minneapolis, St. Louis. In the last city she received a letter from him, written on board and posted when the ship left quarantine. Full of tenderness and grateful memory, kicking against the prospect of returning home, it disturbed her. "You have been the most wonderful person in my life," he wrote. She hugged the phrase, and, against her judgment, could not bring herself to destroy the letter. She felt comforted that he had gone, that soon there would be four thousand miles between them. This, at least, was the end.

Her journeys began to grow longer and drearier, across vast empty prairies, past ugly, huddled towns, wet and muddy and dirty with snow. She read prodigiously, and wrote letters, and stared impatiently out of the windows. Her time-table, or "skedule," as her agents called it, seemed incompetently arranged, her routes re-crossing, involving long jumps across whole

States, blank days of boredom in small, dull towns, and then hectic days of scrambled rushing in evening-dress straight from the lecture platform to the train; arriving in glacial early mornings at cities still asleep in snow; sitting wearily through the halves of movies, waiting for evening trains. She caught cold, and spent long hours in the offices of nose and throat doctors, undergoing elaborate, nauseating treatments to save her voice. She was over-entertained, driven round and shown parks, museums, little theatres and country clubs; given dinners in private houses by hostesses whose husbands made amorous overtures to her, and kissed her in cars and passages; included in theatre parties to see the travelling plays, which were always the same plays. There was one musical comedy which she saw four times; it seemed to dog her footsteps, and its posters were the first things to meet her eye in each new city. It was all very fatiguing, but, despite the rush and strain of it, quite enjoyable. People were kindly, welcoming and cordial, and Elinor's vitality could withstand a great deal. She only wished that she could sleep better; long, wakeful nights on bumping trains were beginning to tell on her.

After two more weeks of this she came one night to a small, depressing town in Iowa. She had been fourteen hours on the train, and arrived at eleven in the evening. It was Sunday; the streets were dark and wet with slush and muddy trodden snow; the whole town seemed to have gone to bed. An ill-tempered taxi-driver took her to her hotel; new, bare and ugly. She asked for a hot drink to be sent to her room, and was told that the kitchen had closed. After her experiences of modern luxurious hotels with perfect service in almost every city she had visited, this annoyed and surprised her, as it would never have done in England. She went to her room, which looked out on to the drab main street, and then found that the bathroom contained only a shower, with an oil-cloth curtain around it, instead of the usual low square tub. This involved telephoning, and the coming and going of resentful, harsh-voiced bell-hops and desk-clerks, before she was moved, two floors up,

to another room with the prospect of a disused shed, and a rusty fire-escape from its windows.

She had just got into bed when the telephone rang. The desk-clerk was speaking from below:

"We got a telegram for you here," he said. "Came yesterday."

Angrily she bade them send it up. It was brought by the night-porter, who looked as though he expected a tip. She dismissed him and opened the wire, which came from London, having been forwarded from New York by her agents. It ran:

"Audrey knows writing Paul."

That was all; but she stared at it with the sensation of having been kicked violently in the stomach.

She did not sleep at all that night. She lay in bed, horrified, wondering. What did it mean? How could Audrey know? Had gossip reached her ears, crossing the Atlantic? She could have had no certain information. Had she taxed Paul with it, and had he admitted it? Would he have admitted it? Surely, oh, surely, he would have lied, unless he felt she would not care? But it was obvious that she cared, or he would never have sent this cable. She switched on the light and looked at it again. He must have sent it the day after landing; she reckoned out the time. What did it mean? What had happened? She knew so little of Audrey beyond the mental picture she had formed of her, so little of the circumstances of their married life, that she could not imagine the effect of this knowledge, but the cable read ominously. Paul had led her to imagine a marriage gone badly astray; had she believed otherwise she would never have taken him as her lover. That any act of hers should come between husband and wife was abhorrent to her, yet the wording of this cable suggested it. "Audrey knows." Why should he have sent it, unless there had been disruption? Did he care? Did Audrey care? Had he perhaps told her himself, in temper, anxious finally to break a marriage which was already too unhappy? She could picture him doing so. She had

rather it were that. But if it should be the other thing, if her vision of the marriage were wrong, if Paul had deceived her . . . The thought gripped her icily with fear. If she had hurt her, that unknown girl. . . . Oh, God, he couldn't, he couldn't have told her!

These were the thoughts which tortured her as she lay all night struggling for sleep, drifting below the surface of her mind, like ugly weeds, all of the next day, while she talked to reporters, drove and lunched with her hostess, and gave her lecture in the afternoon. She had no idea how she went through with it all; she spoke mechanically, from memories of past lectures, chatted, laughed and answered questions from the topmost layer of her thoughts, semi-conscious only of what she was saying or doing. She left the town in the evening, moving farther west.

What could she do? There was nothing for her to do but wait, wait for his letter which would give her details, tell her the meaning of it all, end her suspense, at least. She calculated the time before she could receive it; moving west, as she was doing, daily delayed it, and with her brief stops there was danger of letters going astray, arriving too late to catch her in one place, the hotel clerks neglecting to re-forward them. She had already lost mail in this fashion. She checked her reckoning carefully, and then wired her agents in New York to forward all letters by air mail to await her in San Francisco, although it would be nearly two weeks before she reached there. But she dared not risk losing this letter, and in San Francisco it was certain of finding her, even though it meant some extra days before she could receive it.

The journeys grew longer, and now she could not even read in the train. The thought of Paul obsessed her; the words of his cable never ceased to echo in her head, like the fragment of a song which haunts the memory. She turned her brain inside out, seeking for the explanation. She retained only the vaguest impressions of the country through which she passed and the places where she stayed, seeing much beauty and noting

it superficially, as though she were checking off items on an inventory.

At last she reached San Francisco, early on a warm March morning that was like a pleasant day of June in England. Her taxi crawled, like a fly climbing a wall, up the almost vertical hill to her hotel. She felt shudderingly sick as she asked at the reception-desk for mail, and watched the clerk go slowly through a large batch of letters waiting in a pigeon-hole marked "J." He handed her a pile; she turned them over and found Paul's among them. Her heart seemed to stop. Somehow she got to her room. It seemed as though the bell-boys would never finish putting down her suit-cases, switching on lights in the cupboards and in the bathroom, opening and shutting doors and windows. She tipped them and they left at last. She pulled off her hat, and sat down in a chair at the desk to read the letter. Her hands were trembling and her throat constricted. Outside the window was sunlight and a view of the Golden Gate. She tore open the envelope.

"Audrey knows [he began]. I've cabled you that, and it'll be a week or more before you get this, and God knows what you'll be thinking. Elinor, for God's sake, don't be angry with me—not too angry, anyway. I've got to explain. I told her. I had to tell her. All the way over on the boat I knew I had to. I've never told you much—hardly anything, I think—about my marriage, or about her. I couldn't. I didn't want to. I'd behaved very badly by coming to America. She didn't want me to; I told you that. We parted in a temper, with me walking out of the flat and slamming the door. I spent the last two days before I left England staying in an hotel. The morning the boat left I almost turned round and went back to her. I wanted to, and my pride wouldn't let me. We'd said beastly, hurtful things to each other, and I wouldn't apologise, though I wanted to like hell.

"All the time I was in America it tortured me. I didn't write to her, and she didn't write to me. I told you that, I think. I suppose you got the impression I'd made a damn fool childish marriage that I was sorry for. Well, so I was, in a

way. It's been bloody, always struggling along on no money, and it's got on our nerves often, and we've rowed, and I've told her I regretted it and that she was a drag on me. That was the sort of row our last one was, before I left. But it wasn't true, really. Audrey's a child; she isn't twenty-one yet; and it's been damned hard on her, but she's stuck it marvellously.

"Anyway, all that's neither here nor there. I went on being proud and stubborn and obstinate all the time I was in New York, just as she was being, in London. I made up my mind I wouldn't write until I'd done something to justify myself—not because I wanted to boast or to show her I *had* been right in coming—but because I felt that without that I *couldn't* climb down. I couldn't write as a hopeless failure. I knew I'd been wrong; I couldn't bear the thought of 'I told you so,' of her mother and everything. I couldn't think of her. I wouldn't think of her. I made myself hate her, and it got worse, because all the time I knew she had been right.

"Then you came along. I couldn't tell you all about it. I knew you'd blame me, tell me to write and make it up and to apologise—and I knew you'd be right, and that I couldn't stand being told it. So I told you nothing—or as little as I could. I let you think what I wanted you to think, what I wanted to think, myself.

"That evening when everything crashed, I just didn't care any more. I was past thinking. I felt I could never go home. I felt I could never face her again. You saved my life that night. I want you to know that. If you hadn't kept me with you it would have been suicide. I believe that. I said it to Audrey. She believes it. What she can't forgive is that we went on with it.

"But I suppose I'm skipping things. I haven't got to how I told her, yet. Our three weeks in New York together were marvellous—you know how happy I was. And everything began to come right. Carl West and the play, and everything. I wrote to Audrey. I told her I was coming home. I didn't say anything about the past, and neither did she, when she wrote back. She just wrote quite simply, but I knew she was glad I was coming and that she wanted me. And I wanted her. Perhaps I shouldn't write that to you—but it's the truth, and I've got to tell you.

"All the way over on the boat my conscience worried

me. You see, I wasn't going back to her as though we'd quarrelled. I know we hadn't said anything about it, but we both knew that we were sorry, and it *was* just as though I had apologised and been forgiven. I was going back to her just as we were when we got married. Do you understand what I mean?

"Elinor, I *had* to tell her! I couldn't have gone back to her, deceiving her. I hated myself for kissing her, even, without telling her. I didn't feel like that about it in New York, because I was still angry with her—or, rather, I'd made myself believe I was. I *wanted* to be unfaithful to her. But now, after our letters, it was different. I *had* to tell her. You see, you're the only woman I've ever slept with besides her. I had to tell her!

"I thought she'd forgive me. I thought she'd understand. She can't. I tell you she's young, and it's hurt something in her that goes right deep down inside her—something she can't explain. She went all white and hard. She wouldn't let me touch her. She wouldn't let me come near her. It was late at night when I told her; she wouldn't stay. She walked out of the flat, went back to her mother. She won't see me. She wrote to me the next day. That's when she said that she would have forgiven it if it had only been the first time. It was going on with it which broke her. I don't know what she's going to do. I'm going up to see her mother this afternoon. I'll keep this open until then. I'm nearly mad with wretchedness.

" *Later.*

"I've seen her mother. I can get nothing out of her. Audrey won't come back to me, and she takes her part. She's never liked me; she was against the marriage, and she's getting her own back now. She says Audrey will never live with me again.

"Oh, God, I wish you were here! If I could only see you, and talk to you. Can't you come home? Cancel your tour and come! Please, please, please!

"I can't write any more. This has got a mail to catch. For God's sake, write to me, and tell me you forgive me, that you don't hate and despise me too utterly. God bless you, and help me.  
Paul."

She put the letter down and sat for a moment staring

ahead of her, trying to collect her thoughts. But her mind, though turbulent beneath with emotion and with pictures that the letter had evoked, seemed somehow to have frozen on its surface, so that she could not think or state to herself what her feelings were. With an almost mechanical instinct she turned to the rest of her correspondence and began to read her letters, as though this one of Paul's contained nothing that she needed yet to think about, opening envelopes and glancing at their contents, laying them aside if they were too long for speedy or for superficial reading, registering what needed immediate answer and what not. But gradually the process slackened and her hands became inert, as her mind started slowly to grope backwards and thought began again to push itself upwards, sprouting through the level of her consciousness.

She turned once more to the letter, a sick and clammy feeling rising like fear from the pit of her stomach, but she could not read it; she crushed it in her hand as its full significance began to creep over her. The sensation which was uppermost was terror, a strange, unreasoned terror, as though she had been caught by some force stronger than herself and dragged into a whirlpool from which there was no escape. She fought that sense, fought it with all her reason, striving to regard the situation and to analyse it, to examine the fear which lapped around her, but still she could not; still her mind refused to work. She put on her hat again and went downstairs, the letter in her bag; downstairs and out into the street, where she began to walk, but blindly, since she did not know the city, and direction had no significance for her there.

She walked a long way, downhill and through the shopping streets, thoughts moving like a slowly clearing smoke in her brain, gathering, clouding and dispersing. At last, however, she became aware of her body, weary and jarred by the jostling of the people in the street, aware that she had no destination and that she was ignorant of where she was. She took a taxi back to her hotel. It was lunch-time when she reached there; the



desk-clerk, when she applied for her key, handed her messages received in her absence; people had called, had telephoned, would telephone again. She left instructions that she was not to be disturbed, and went to her room, where, half mechanically, she ordered lunch, and then found that she could not eat it. At last, over a cup of coffee, she turned again to the letter.

And now contempt was the emotion that obsessed her—contempt and a fierce, bitter anger against him: anger, contemptuous, for his weakness and his whining, for his selfishness and his cruelty; anger for the way in which he had lied to her with half-truths, telling her that his marriage was the stupidest thing he had done in his whole life, deliberately giving her the false impression that he wanted her to have; anger, blinding anger, that she had been dragged into this, forced by lies and weakness so to hurt a child; anger for his pleading now, his pitiable begging that she should not be angry.

A picture of Audrey arose in her mind, called up by his description, "She isn't twenty-one yet": a new picture, the picture of a child, a child like Evelyn almost, white-faced, with wide eyes blank with misery and hurt, hurt that went to the depths of her, the depths with which she loved him. Oh, God, what had she done? What had she done? These children loved each other; they had always loved each other. That much, at least, was plain from his letter; and she had wrecked that love. Was it her fault? Was she to blame, she the woman, older in years and knowledge, for letting him stay that night, for taking him as her lover, lightly, carelessly, as it had begun? Oh, but she had not known! If she had dreamed that it could lead to this, if she had known, then, all that now he had written her of his marriage, of how things stood between them, never, never, never would she have yielded. "Never," she cried aloud, sobbing to herself, "never! Oh, but I should have known," she wailed. "He was a child; I should have known. Yet he was a liar; how could I have known?"

Again she turned her thoughts to him, to his deception

of her, to his letter and his confession, and again anger rose in her, for the cruelty, the wanton selfishness, the self-love of it all. His letter was despairing, yes, but the despair was only for himself, for his loss of Audrey, because he loved her, for the havoc he had worked, but only as it touched himself. There was repentance, easy enough now, for his lying, but he had no doubts, no regrets for his confession, no thought of the motive that had prompted it, the intolerable, over-weening selfishness that had sent him headlong to it. *That* was justified; all pain, all misery, all suffering were justified, if only his conscience were clear, cleared, all sin wiped away, by confession.

"His conscience!" she cried. "His bloody little conscience! To be absolved at her expense; at my expense; at anyone's expense; that *he* might feel comfortable! The cruelty of it! It's contemptible! Contemptible!"

Again her anger towered up, like a sheet of flame, enveloping her. She had no pity for him, only this fierce, raging anger that shrivelled her love for him, turning it suddenly to savage fury. It was for Audrey that her heart was faint with pity, for the child that she had wronged unknowingly, the child that he had made her hurt so cruelly. Paul's cry to herself was only his old cry, the cry of his loneliness, shut off from Audrey whom he loved, the young lover crying in the night, asking for pity, pity for the desolation of his own heart, the desolation he himself had wrought, wrought by his thoughtless, brutal selfishness.

She stood by the window, staring out at the blue and gold loveliness of the view with hard, uncomprehending eyes and a strange sense that the world had dropped away from her, that all her other life had slipped somehow like a garment from around her, leaving her isolated on some high, lonely peak of angry pain.

In the evening she wrote him a brief note:

"You have done the cruellest thing I ever heard of. The selfishness of it is beyond belief; all of it, your lies to me and

to yourself, the light unloading of your conscience, without thought, either then or now, of all the harm that you were doing. That you have made me so hurt your wife is a thing that I shall never forgive. If *she* does, it is more than you deserve, but to me you need not look for pity or forgiveness. Elfinor."

When she had written this she went outside and dropped it in the mail-chute by the elevator. Then she returned to her room and went over to the desk, where she sat again, and began to cry, brokenly, dreadfully, for the harm that she had done, the harm she had been made to do.

## XVI

SHE sailed for home at the beginning of April, in company with Hermione, whom she had seen in Chicago on her way east from her lecture tour. Hermione, finishing up her job, had suggested their sharing a cabin on the boat to save expense.

The tour had worked to its end in a series of immense journeys through the vast tall forests up to Portland and Seattle, the snowy, primitive bareness of Montana and the interminable, dreary plains of the Dakotas. The day-and-night-long stretches in the train had been wastes of endless boredom; she re-read the whole series of Barchester novels in her last three weeks of travel. From Chicago she went to Montreal, and thence to New York, where she spent two weeks before her departure. Her play, much to her surprise, had come to life again, Lois Fane having taken it on the road after the failure of *Romeo and Juliet*, which had been one of the most impressive disasters in the theatrical history of America, and had given rise to innumerable wise-cracks which went the rounds of New York, attributed to a new author with each repetition, much as does a *cause célèbre* in the English matrimonial courts.

Her letter to Paul had been not an end but a beginning. He had written in reply, not once but many times; she received at least two letters from him by every mail, imploring letters, begging her not to cast him off, to forgive him, to return home, to see him, to let him talk to her. He was in desperation; Audrey had gone abroad; he did not know where she was; he did not know what she was going to do; he could not work, he could not write; if he had ever needed Elinor, he needed her now, her wisdom, her consolation and her counsel; if he could not feel that she were still in the world for

him to turn to, he might as well kill himself; there was nothing left for him.

Meanwhile, her own attitude was changing. Her first emotion of violent anger had lasted a few days only, though it yet had surging recurrences; but as time went on she began to weaken, to blame herself more and more, taking to herself the responsibility, going over again and again every word he had ever said to her, all that he had ever told her of his marriage, reproaching herself for not having then seen the interstices, not having guessed how they could be filled with the facts as she now knew them, accusing herself for not having judged his character aright, for not having foreseen all that since had happened; charging herself, even, in her worst moments, with having deliberately closed her eyes, wilfully believing what she wanted to believe, purposely refraining from asking what she did not wish to know. It was not true; she knew it was not true; but there was a half-truth in it and, in her loneliness during the endless days and nights of her tour, lying awake in strange hotel bedrooms or in sleeping-cars, staring out at the ceaseless panorama beyond the windows of the trains, turning it over and over again in her head as though her mind were walking a burning treadmill of thought, she had come to lose perspective, to convince herself that the fault was hers.

She had blamed him for his confession. Had she the right to control another's conscience? To her it seemed weak and cruelly selfish; by all her standards he should have kept silence, to save the pain he must have known that his telling would cause; but had she the right to force her standards on him? She accused herself endlessly, making it seem, to herself, even as though she had seduced him. She had loved him as he had never loved her; it was Audrey that he loved, that he had always loved, and, through her, he had lost her; therefore, surely, she must reproach herself? She no longer loved him; she despised him or, in moments, pitied him, for his lies, his weakness, for a sickly conscience, unable to stand up to what he had done, for a selfish passion

for scenes; but she would not take refuge behind her contempt, she who was older and stronger than he. She had no wish now ever to see him again; the memory of his beauty no longer touched her to anything but a sense of its falseness and its weakness; but if he wanted her, it seemed her duty to do all she could to help to repair the wreckage of those lives: not for his sake, but for her own, for the sake of that wounded, unknown girl whom she had betrayed.

She told Hermione the story on the voyage home. She had not meant to do so, but after six weeks of this endless circle of arguing with herself, she had need to talk to someone. Hermione, when she had her to herself like this, was very different from the striving figure she presented socially, and far more like the friend Elinor had known twenty years ago at school. Moreover, Hermione successful was a far pleasanter person than Hermione despondent and greedily ambitious through fear of failure and neglect, and, at the moment, her Chicago job had placed her on the crest of the wave. She had sailed with several commissions to return, and they made considerable difference to her nature, allowing her to be gentle and understanding with Elinor now, as she had occasionally shown herself before in times of illness or trouble.

Elinor found herself liking Hermione as she had not done for years, and the intimacy of a shared cabin in the hours after midnight restored the long-forgotten sense of dormitory confidences.

"Darling, how perfectly foul for you," said Hermione. "What a little swine! I always thought he was no good from the first time Betsy brought him to see me. But I don't see what you've got to reproach yourself with."

Elinor tried to explain.

"But, darling, that's ridiculous. How could you have known? You couldn't very well have stopped him just as he was getting into bed, and said: 'Excuse me, but what are your relations with your wife?'—now could you? If he chooses to go and tell, that's his look-out, not yours. You mustn't be unhappy about it. He was a

little rotter, and you made a mistake, that's all. I know you and Betsy thought he was terribly good-looking. I never could see it myself, but I don't blame you for going to bed with him."

"It's not that," said Elinor.

"Well, darling, what is it? You're not in love with him, are you?"

"No, not any more. I was, but he's killed that all right."

"So I should hope! You're not old enough for that, yet. Time enough for boys like that when you're fifty. No, you're feeling sore, that's all. I know these things are awful at the time, but you just don't see him again, and you'll soon get over it. He isn't worth upsetting yourself about, a little pip-squeak like that; he isn't worth being angry with. His wife isn't going to divorce him, or anything silly like that, is she?"

"I don't know. She might."

"Oh, but you can't have that. Think of the publicity of it. You can't afford to have that kind of thing happen to you. Could she divorce him? Could she prove anything? Has she got any letters or anything?"

"No, not letters. I suppose there's evidence, if she looks for it. We went to Atlantic City one week-end, and I suppose Sabina could talk. But it isn't that I'm thinking of. It's that I've bust that marriage that I can't bear."

"It sounds to me as if it must have been pretty well bust before you came into it at all. If he had quarrelled with his wife and not written to her for six months, I don't see how he can put it off on to you. You're being made the scapegoat, that's all. I wouldn't stand for it. It's quite obvious that they'd have split, anyway, but I wouldn't let myself be made the cause of it, if I were you."

"They love each other, Hermione," Elinor urged insistently.

"Well, it seems to me they've a funny way of showing it. I've no patience with that kind of thing. What is a bit of adultery, after all?"

"The greatest crime against marriage," Elinor said

violently. "Do you think I'd ever knowingly come between husband and wife? Do you think I'd ever take a man from another woman? Do you think I'd ever take on a man whose wife I've met or shaken hands with, even? No, it's the worst form of treachery. It's the rottenest thing one woman can do to another. That's why I'm so sick with myself now, that I've been made to do it against my will."

"Darling, you're being ridiculous. That sort of talk is all right in books and on the stage, but you know it's ridiculous. Do you know a single married couple who are faithful to each other? Nancy and Sam: you know Sam's weakness for 'little peaches'; Winkie and Goronwy; Brenda and Richard . . ."

"Tom and Cynthia are."

"Oh, Tom and Cynthia . . .!" Hermione waved them aside.

"Anyway, that doesn't matter. What other people do and think is their business. The point is that if I hadn't believed Paul's marriage had already gone phut, nothing would have induced me to take him on."

"That's where you're so silly. Nobody would blame you, anyway. You're getting Early Victorian, darling. When I first went to live in Brussels I thought it was just Belgian to treat adultery as the usual thing, but it's the same everywhere. You know it is. Fernand was no worse than half the husbands you meet in London; he was more honest about it, that's all. You're just making yourself miserable over an idea."

"We all do," said Elinor, bitterly. "They're the only things that do make one miserable."

"I don't know what you mean," Hermione returned. "But I do know that you're being very stupid to upset yourself like this. Of course you're angry with the little swine, but what does it *matter*? Leave him to get out of his own messes. If his wife did divorce him, you wouldn't think of marrying him, I suppose?"

"No."

"I should hope not. I'd see that you were certified, before I'd let you do that; but it's just the kind of silly,



quixotic thing you might do, all the same. You'd have some idea of making an honest worm of him. Now, darling, forget it. Just forget it. Take a cachet and try and get to sleep."

They did not talk of it again, but Hermione was very sweet and gentle for the rest of the trip, petting her and performing little services for her, as though she were ill.

They landed at Plymouth in the morning, reaching Paddington at five o'clock. The country, seen from the train, might almost have been put there as an advertisement of what England could do by way of spring beauty, bright in sunshine, bland and copious in its softness, its abundance of green, its brimming richness of tranquillity. Even Hermione responded to it. "Isn't it lovely?" she said. "It almost makes one wish one lived in it. But doesn't it seem small after America?" To Elinor its simplicity and its sweetness were almost hurtfully endearing; she thought of her long journeys in America, and this fertile land of trees and fields and hedges, with its farms, its little churches, its flowers and narrow idle lanes made her want to throw out her arms as though to embrace it, to hold it to her, somehow to express her sense of kinship with it, after the great stretches of loneliness or grandeur that she had seen.

Her mind began to frame uncompleted sentimental phrases, hackneyed and second-hand, such as she would have despised in literature, unrelated, drenched in their sentiment: phrases about the sleeping peace of fields: dear English soil. A sense of all the poets who had ever loved and written of England flooded her brain, and scraps of quotation began to detach themselves; Browning and Kipling; Ford Madox Hueffer's "Footsloggers": "*It is because our land is beautiful and green and comely*"; "comely," she stroked the word in her mind lovingly; and Francis Brett Young's "*England came to me, England the giver, in a vision of three poplar trees that shiver . . .*"; and Flecker's "*Meadows of England shining in the rain*"; and much of Brooke, "Granchester," and "The Soldier": "*Hearts at peace, under an English Heaven.*"

But so many of these were written in exile, inspired by the longing that had possessed her often while she was away, yet had never seemed so intense, so tear-stinging an emotion as was this sense of re-capture now. There were no words, no phrases for it, this happiness beating in her throat so that she could scarce sit still, choked with a sense of overflowing.

The train flashed on. A stretch of Devonshire coast-line caught her eye. Here, just a year ago, had she been with Gus; eleven months since their parting, their bitter, angry scene on the hill. How far away that seemed, how shallow and petty that hurt, that sting of wounded pride and dignity, compared with this shadow that now was on her life. The memory of Paul came back, sickeningly; the thought of his misery and of that unknown wife, the child that she had hurt. The brightness of the country faded, and she fell again to brooding.

Paul was on the platform at Paddington. She had written him of her coming, and she saw him as soon as she descended from the train. His appearance shocked her, for he was pale and haggard and ill-kempt in his attire, beyond even what she remembered of him at their first casual meeting. After the care he had taken of himself in New York, the contrast was doubly strong. He was wearing a suit that she knew well, but it was stained and creased and seemed to hang on him. Her heart was momentarily drawn together as he saw her and came timidly towards her, like a dog that expects to be beaten.

Hermione acknowledged him with chilliness; Ham Sotherington was present to meet her, and she went off with him in a taxi, having kissed Elinor and whispered: "Darling, how awful he looks! Now you will be firm, won't you, and remember that it's over? Ring me up very soon."

"Can I come back with you?" Paul asked her. She nodded. "Where are you going?"

"To my flat. It'll be ready for me. I wrote to Mrs. Moggridge. Oh, I forgot, you don't know her."

They collected her luggage and she gave her address

to the driver. Paul got in beside her. He did not speak until she did.

"Well?" she said, as they left the station.

"We've got to talk," he answered. "Have you forgiven me?"

"I don't know," she replied. "Have you any news?"

"Audrey's back from Brittany."

"Have you seen her?"

He shook his head.

"She won't," he answered.

"Where are you living? Still in your flat?"

"Yes; it's ghastly."

Their voices were flat and mechanical. Suddenly his broke.

"Oh, thank God you're back!" he cried. "Thank God!" He tried to take her hand, and she moved it.

"What can I do?" she asked in the same dull tone.

"I can talk to you," he said, "if only you'll let me. I've been so horribly alone. Elinor, don't be cruel to me."

He seized her hand now, and she turned, facing him.

"Paul," she said, "it's no good behaving like that. We've got to have this out, properly, if we're to talk at all." But he had started to cry. "Don't go on like that," she commanded, her own nerves badly on edge. "Pull yourself together, or stop the taxi and get out. You can't behave like that."

He dropped her hand, and made an effort to master himself, squaring his shoulders, turning away from her.

"All right," he said, quietly. "I'm sorry."

They drove in silence the rest of the way. The streets were quiet and sunny and simple. Exhibition Road was long and straight and familiar; she greeted the bookshop at the corner as though it were a friend.

"Will you help the man with the luggage?" she said to Paul. "I'll take these little ones."

The housekeeper opened the door to her, with a face that looked like a gas-cooker smiling.

"How are you, Mrs. Moggridge?"

"I'm very well, Miss. I hope you've had a pleasant time."

She went upstairs and into the sitting-room, which seemed somehow larger than she had expected, too empty, too tidy, too full of a six months' silence. She wanted to get at things and pull them about. Mrs. Moggridge had laid a table in the centre, with knives and forks and a cup and saucer, as though for high tea. There was a small fire burning palely in the strong afternoon light, and some flowers on the table. A few letters were lying on her desk and some more flowers in a vase. She put down her bag and removed her gloves, with a feeling of suspension between two worlds. She did not quite know what to do. She went into her bedroom and looked at it, and then came back again. Paul and the taxi-driver were staggering up the stairs with her wardrobe trunk, Mrs. Moggridge watching them mistrustfully from below.

She stood looking at her letters while her luggage was brought in.

"You'll be wanting tea, Miss?" Mrs. Moggridge asked. "You'll have had lunch? Only in your wire this morning you said three o'clock, so I got you some fish in, in case. You'll be liking it for tea, perhaps?"

"No, thanks," said Elinor, "just tea. We were later than I thought. I had lunch on the train. And an extra cup and saucer for Mr. Fairless."

"Very good, Miss. Oh, and those flowers came this morning. I put what I could in water, and there's some more in a basin in the kitchen, what I couldn't find vases for. I've put the cards on the desk, Miss. I wrote on them what came from which."

Elinor turned over the cards: Nancy, Cynthia and Richard. "I must ring them up," she murmured.

Over tea Paul was anxious to begin again, but she laid her finger to her lips, jerking her head in the direction of her bedroom, where Mrs. Moggridge had started to unpack her things.

"Later," she whispered.

Soon the telephone began to ring; first Nancy, then

Winkie, then Evelyn Anthony, shrill with the excitement of Elinor's return. The conversations took a long time, and Paul sat at the table in wretched-looking patience, his eyes taking in the room while she talked. Her tea was cold when she returned to it.

"Listen," she said quietly. "That's going to go on for the next hour and a half, and we can't talk with Mrs. Moggridge about. I'll tell you what to do. Go now, and come back and have some food with me at half-past seven."

"Must I?"

"Yes, Paul. It's not a bit of good like this. You don't know this place."

She was right about the telephone. By half-past seven she had picked up the threads of most of the happenings in London since her departure, and made appointments to see her friends as soon as possible. Richard was one of the last to ring up; Brenda had just undergone a second operation. "It's pretty serious," he said, "worse than we thought. I suppose you're busy to-night, or I'd ask if I might come round."

"I'm afraid I am. Where are you living? In your own house?"

"Yes. Brenda's still in the nursing-home. I want to see you awfully. It's marvellous of you to be back."

She arranged to meet him the next day, and went into the kitchen where Mrs. Moggridge, gladly over-staying her time, was preparing a meal.

"It's nice to be back," she said.

"Yes, Miss."

"The flat looks cleaner than I've ever seen it."

"I gave it a proper turn-out yesterday and this morning, Miss, but I dare say it'll soon be how you like it again."

Elinor wandered about the sitting-room, looking at her books and opening the drawers of her desk. Paul returned at half-past seven; Mrs. Moggridge gave them dinner, and presently departed.

"Now," said Elinor, "we can talk. This flat's constructed all wrong for confidences in the daytime."

"Audrey wants a divorce," said Paul in a hard, tight voice. "Her mother wrote to me."

Elinor did not move.

"I see," she said, quietly, and waited.

"Elinor, won't you go and see her?" he burst out. "She won't see me. She won't let me come near her. Won't you go and see her?"

"To say what?"

He met her eyes, and looked away from her.

"To ask her to take you back?" she questioned.

He did not speak.

"You want to go back to her?"

His assent, if such it was, was the merest lowering of his lids.

"And you can come to me?"

"Elinor, don't!" he cried. "I know I deserve it, but don't be cruel now."

She fought the anger that was rising in her again.

"I know you think it was despicable of me to tell her," he went on. "But I had to."

"To clear your conscience?"

"Yes."

"Without thought of what it would mean . . . to her?"

"I had to. I couldn't bear deceiving her."

She checked all the things that rose to her lips to say.

"Well, I wrote you what I thought of that. There's no point in discussing it now."

"Your first letter nearly killed me," he said. "I can't see that it was selfish. My treatment of you, yes, that I know. But to her; it seemed to me only honest. You would have had me lie to her?"

"I would have had you keep your mouth shut."

"I couldn't bear the idea of going on, on a lie."

"That's where I say you were selfish, thinking of yourself. You never thought of her. You never thought of her happiness. If you had, you would rather a hundred times have had the lie on your conscience than kill her with the truth. I've no patience with this passion for confession; it's self-indulgence. 'The truth, the truth at

any price," she quoted bitterly. "Half the trouble in life is made by people who can't lie, who can't keep their mouths shut, who must tell the truth at all costs, who would smash anything rather than have their conscience troubled."

"That's *The Wild Duck*," he said.

"I don't mind. That doesn't make it any the less true. You should never, never, never have told her! Adultery is a bad enough crime in a marriage like yours, but confession is a thousand times worse."

He turned away, faintly contemptuous.

"I never imagined you could be cynical like that," he said.

"God damn it, I'm not being cynical!" she cried. "I'm talking sound sense. I'm not trying to excuse myself, or our having slept together. I loathe adultery; I loathe all this promiscuous bedding that goes on. Not for itself, but for all the misery it brings, all the hatred and the hurting and the lying, all the other things it brings crashing down with it. But if you're going to do it, the least you can do is to stand by it. You've no right to go in for that kind of thing, if you can't see it through. Between the parties it's their own affair, and they've got to stand the racket; but how often does it stop there? And why? Because people can't hold their tongues. What right had you to smash your wife's life like that? What right?"

"You're judging by results," he said sulkily. "What about the principle?"

"Too much honesty's a dangerous principle," she answered, growing quieter now. "It isn't everyone who can stand it. I've no absolute theories of right and wrong, but I do know that one shouldn't hurt other people, or, at least, I know that *I* can't. Oh, I was to blame, too. It's all very well for me to force my standards on you now; I should have taken care of that before. Don't think I haven't reproached myself. I have; good and hard. But never mind that." She pulled herself up. "I didn't mean to bawl you out like this. I wrote you what I thought. I'll say no more. She wants a divorce, you

say? And she won't see you. You want me to go and see her?"

"If you would."

She reflected a long while.

"I'll go," she said. "God knows it won't be any fun for me, but if I can patch this up, I will."

"God bless you," he cried.

"It's for my own sake," she told him, "for my own peace of mind, as much as anything. I've not felt too comfortable these last few weeks. I've not felt any too proud of myself. Where does she live?"

"With her mother in Wimbledon. I'll give you the address."

"Will she see me, do you think?"

"I don't know. I hope to God she will."

"Well, I'll do what I can."

When he left her, she sat on, staring into the fire, reproaching herself for having abused him, once again taking the blame to herself. Her anger had been re-born in her against her will, contradicting her. In any case, it was of small use now to blame him, pitifully desolated by the wrong to which she had at least contributed. She despised him, but she pitied him in his weakness, and she must do what she could to set this right, to purge her own conscience, and, for their sake, to bring these two together. She sat down to write to Audrey.

The answer came on the following evening:

"Dear Madam,—I have received your letter, and can see no reason why we should meet.—Yours truly,

Audrey Fairless."

She would not accept that, however, and went next morning early to Wimbledon, determined to see her. She came away beaten; she had seen Audrey, and seen her inflexible. The girl had come into the square suburban drawing-room, filled with Rossetti and Burne-Jones against a sort of William Morris wallpaper, where Elinor was waiting, and had stood throughout the interview, wearing a large straw hat of old-fashioned shape, and drawing her gloves between her fingers, as though she



were about to go out. She was slight and rather delicious, with something about her that suggested Dora in *David Copperfield*: a modern revue actress playing the part, perhaps. Elinor wondered why Dora should have come into her head, and then remembered the phrase "child-wife." Audrey looked very like a child-wife, with a pathetic, hurt dignity, drooping a little until she remembered to hold herself erect. She said very little, but listened to Elinor, with her large grey eyes fixed on the bright, sunny road and the laburnum trees beyond the windows. Elinor went on talking until suddenly Audrey interrupted her.

"You needn't go on," she said. "It's quite, quite useless. I'm not going to forgive Paul. I'm not going to take him back. I don't want you to think I'm old-fashioned. It isn't that. If it had been once, the first time, as he described it to me, I could have forgiven it. It would have been like going with a prostitute. He was lonely that night, and unhappy. I could have forgiven that. But to go on, to go on living with you, being happy with you, forgetting me waiting for him here at home, behaving as though I didn't matter, that's what I won't forgive. If I mattered to him so little . . ." She stopped, as though near to tears, and then went on: "There's no use in our discussing it. My marriage is over. It was over eight months ago when he left me, only I didn't know it."

Elinor made another attempt to argue, but Audrey stopped her.

"Please," she said. "I want to go out. It's no good your going on. I don't want to say anything more. I should only say things I should be sorry for. I've quite made up my mind, and Paul knows it. So, good-bye. I'm sorry you have had the trouble of coming, but it was your wish, not mine."

Elinor did not believe it. She did not believe that the girl meant it. It was something that was being forced on her, by her mother perhaps, something she was making herself believe that she meant. The phrase about the prostitute, which had momentarily hurt

Elinor more acutely than anything in her life, seemed, on reflection, to show that. It did not ring true; Audrey was too young to take that view; the idea of Paul's going with a prostitute would have sickened her, revolted something physical in her. Elinor remembered that Paul had said in his letter that Audrey had written him this, the fact that she could have forgiven his first lapse, after she had returned home to her mother. It was obvious that she had been hurt, bitterly hurt, but it seemed, too, as though she were anxious to show herself somehow superior to that hurt, to make herself sophisticated, to rationalise her jealousy so that she might not seem old-fashioned; she had invented all this, or it had been invented for her, to cover an emotion which she felt to be too simple, and to defend her against her love for Paul, which might otherwise have dragged her back to him.

He, when Elinor related the interview, confirmed her suspicions about the mother.

"She's making her take it like that," he said. "I know, from the way she talked to me. Do you think there's any hope, Elinor?"

"She's made up her mind," said Elinor. "I don't believe she wants to, but she wants to want to. She's horribly, horribly hurt, but I believe she'd get over that if she were left to herself. But you can't get at her. She's made up her mind, and I'm afraid she'll go through with it, however much it hurts her to do so. She believes, or somebody has told her, that her pride demands it. I don't see what you can do. Argument is only going to make it worse."

Three weeks later she was served with divorce papers, her own name cited as co-respondent. Incredibly it had happened; it was one of the things like bankruptcy, or the death-sentence, which she could never have believed would happen to her. It stunned her.

"Do you want to fight it?" Paul asked her.

"What's the use? It wouldn't give her back to you, even if we won, I'm afraid."

"It would save your reputation."

She considered for a moment.

"I don't know what evidence they've got," she said, "besides your confession. I don't know whether that's evidence against me, but I imagine I've put myself out of court by going to see her—enough to make it not worth fighting, anyway. And if they've been making inquiries over there, Sabina could be got to talk, I suppose. She caught you in the bathroom one morning, you remember? No, it would mean a lot of dirty linen washed in public. What's the use? Better let it go undefended."

"My dear . . . I'm sorry," he said, wretchedly, and she shrugged her shoulders.

She saw Paul almost every day. He could not keep away from her. He had to be with her, or go mad, he said; it was only when he was with her that he felt sane; his nights were agonies of loneliness. They drifted back to something of the intimacy they had shared in New York, save that they were no longer lovers, but they seemed now to have a stronger tie in their position, hateful as it was. Elinor felt numbed, unable to think or to foresee the future, caught in the present as in a gummy web. She accepted Paul and his need of her almost without thought, as something inevitable; remotely, she was fond of him, but as she had been at first, before she had come to love him, or even more distantly than that, for in those days she had delighted in his beauty, which found her now insensitive, since she saw it always as the mask of his weakness and the symbol of his power to drag her to her present wretchedness. But there was still an affection left for him, an affection that went somehow with protectiveness and was not incompatible with the shadowy contempt, merging into pity, that she felt for him; she worried about him, he looked so ill, so painfully drawn, with dark shadows under his eyes from sleeplessness, feverishly starved and thin. She saw to it that he fed often at her Mews, and nourishingly, for he was taking no care of himself, living alone in the tiny flat that he had shared with Audrey. He remained there, miserably, using up

the six months which remained unexpired of its lease, and one day she asked him to take her there, that she might see the conditions under which he lived.

It shocked her, poor and sordid beyond her imagination, consisting of two attic rooms in a tall house in Charlotte Street, near the Scala Theatre, with a kitchen-bathroom, foully messed, where Paul's shaving things lay on a table littered with dirty plates, a frying-pan, a bowl with broken egg-shells, a bottle of Bluebell, and a greasy paper half wrapped around a lump of lard. The walls of the bathroom, too, were peeling in huge patches, that looked like sores. In the bedroom were only a large low double bed with coarse, soiled-looking linen, grey, emasculated pillows, and a thin, unwholesome, dark-hued coverlet; a chest of drawers with a standing mirror; and one chair. Paul's suits hung on pegs behind an almost transparent curtain. The sitting-room was better, with a number of books in home-carpentered shelves, and some pleasant etchings and drawings on the walls, which Paul explained that he had had up at Oxford. But even here the paper was stained with marks of damp and in-blowing rain around the windows, and the whole place smelt of stale food and stuffiness.

Involuntarily Elinor shuddered as she looked round her, and thought of the two children living in this squalor. "How they must have loved each other, to be able to stand it at all," she thought.

"Pretty awful, isn't it?" said Paul, with a little laugh. "It was better when Audrey was here. She looked after it; I don't."

"Poor Ponky," Elinor murmured.

It was the first time she had called him that since New York. He came towards her, and put his arm round her shoulders. They stood quite still for a few moments, and then he shyly kissed her cheek. She patted his head, and moved away from him, looking at a drawing—one of his own—on the wall.

"Elinor," he said in a strange voice, "what are we going to do when all this is over?"

"Do?" she echoed.

"You wouldn't . . . I suppose you couldn't . . . bear to think of marrying me?"

She had her back to him, and did not move.

"Could you? Could you, Elinor?" he said, urgently.

"If you would . . ."

"No, Ponky." She turned to him.

"Oh, Elinor, if you would . . . I've been wanting to ask you for days. I haven't dared. Elinor, won't you, won't you?"

He was kneeling on an arm-chair now, his fingers grasping the back. She came towards him and laid her hands on his.

"When this is over, you're going to forget it," she said, sensibly.

"Never," he replied. "Elinor, if you'd marry me it would give me something to live for. God knows I haven't much without."

"You've got your work. No, Paul dear, you mustn't be silly."

"Why silly?"

"For us to marry? It would be crazy."

"Why?"

"You're twenty-five."

"Is that all? As if I cared."

"Perhaps I do."

"You're afraid people would laugh at you?"

She laughed, herself.

"That's the one thing I've never been afraid of. They always have, anyway."

"Then why not?"

"Because it would be madness."

"But why?" he repeated insistently.

"What would be the basis of our marriage?" she asked. "Our affair in New York . . . your divorce?"

"Other people have married for less."

"I've no wish to be like them."

She moved from the chair. He rose and followed her.

"Elinor," he pleaded, "till to-day I haven't dared speak. I haven't dared touch you, even. I've wanted

you terribly. It's been comfort to be with you, but I've wanted more than that. I've wanted you again."

She sat down on a divan made of packing-cases, covered with cretonne and thin, disappointing cushions.

"And Audrey?" she said, bitterly.

He recoiled.

"That's not fair," he said.

"Isn't it?" she turned to him. "You want Audrey. You love her. Don't you? Don't you?"

"What's the use?" he asked, with a shrug of his shoulders. "That's over."

"But you love her?"

"Elinor, don't! That's over."

"But it's true. You love her. How can you want me?"

"I do," he said, vehemently. "I need you. You're different. I need you. Elinor, Elinor . . ." He approached her again and sat beside her, putting his arm round her shoulders, trying to turn her to him.

"Elinor, don't! Don't turn away. Elinor, look at me!"

She moved her head, looking into his eyes, meeting there the same ardent look of pleading, the same need of her that she had seen that night in her apartment in New York, but now it no longer stirred her. He tried to kiss her, but she put him from her.

"No, Paul," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"There's no going back."

"Elinor, I want you. We're together in this. Oh, I know it's my fault. I'll admit everything against me, I'll lie down and let you walk on me, but we're together in it; we're alone in it. Or, rather, I am. I don't suppose you've any use for me. You can stand on your own—you always have. But I . . . I'm alone. I can't. I can't go on alone, without you. Elinor, we were happy in New York; you liked me then. Can't you forgive me this?"

"It isn't that."

"What is it, then? If you'll forgive me, can't you remember how happy we were? Can't we go on being

happy like that? Oh, I know I'm nothing much for you, but with you I could work, I could make something of myself. Without you, I'm lost. And we could be happy."

"No, Paul." She spoke wearily now.

"But why? Why not?"

"Because you don't love me, Paul, and I don't love you. That would be our only excuse. But you love Audrey, and I . . ."

"And you?" he caught her up; "is there anyone else?"

"No." She shook her head, with a little faintly contemptuous laugh.

"Then why not? We've never loved each other, romantically, either of us." She let that pass. "But we've been happy. At least, I was. I think you were. Then why not?"

"Because that's over," she reiterated. "You've got to look to the future."

"There's no future without you to help me."

"Paul, that's silly. You're young."

"I can't begin all over again, with no one—alone. Those weeks before you came back . . . those nights . . . these days when I've hardly dared talk to you, only hang around just to be with you. . . . Elinor?"

"No." She shook her head, definitely. "I must go."

He said nothing, only stared at her dumbly. She took her bag from a chair.

"Are you coming with me?" she asked.

He shook his head without speaking, and sat again in the arm-chair.

"Good-bye, then," she said.

"Good-bye." His voice meant nothing. It seemed scarcely to belong to him. She looked at him with a desperate sense of impotence, stirred, although angered, at his face, pale, dark and haunting, a mask of misery.

"Paul, don't," she said, coming back to him.

"You'd better go."

"Ring me in the morning."

He shook his head.

"You don't want to see me again?" she asked.

"I shan't see you again." His tone was melodramatic, threatening. It alarmed her.

"What do you mean?" she said, sharply.

"What have I got to live for?" He looked up at her, as he sat crouched in the arm-chair.

"Don't talk like that."

"It's true," he cried, and pulled her to him, laying his face against her skirt, blubbering.

"Paul," she commanded, "don't! Sit up!"

He pulled away from her.

"You'd better go," he repeated.

"How can I, with you like that?" she asked. "Paul, you can't behave like this!"

"It's all right," he said. His voice was dark and thick, but he had mastered his tears. "I haven't dared ask you before. I've put off asking you, because I was afraid—afraid of this. Well, it's over now. I know."

"Paul," she said, kindly, reasonably, "it's absurd to talk of marriage for us."

"I know," he said, listlessly.

"But you can't take it like this."

"How else? It's the only thing left in the world that I want. I've lost everything else. There's nothing left except for me to kill myself. That's not heroics, or melodrama; it's plain, simple truth."

"Oh, very well," she flamed in sudden anger. "Kill yourself, then. I should think you'd better. Only, remember, it'll mean an end to all this misery you're enjoying so."

"Enjoying?"

"Yes, enjoying. You know you're enjoying it!"

"Am I?" His voice went limp again. "If you say so." He turned away from her.

She stood there helplessly, hating him almost, incensed by his self-pity, his weak threatening, yet unable to leave him. She could not go like this. Suppose he were to carry out his threat; she did not believe that he would, but supposing that he did, how would she feel? How could she leave him, here in these poor, disconsolate rooms which must yet be full of memories for him,



memories of the life that now was in ruins, the life that she had broken? Had she broken it? She could hardly remember now, but in any case she had helped to break it. She came back to him.

"Paul dear," she said, her voice yielding to tenderness, "it's not as bad as that. Nothing's as 'bad as that.'"

"Not for you, perhaps."

"Nor for you, Paul."

She tried to take his head against her breast, but he pulled away. She stood staring down at him, while he looked before him, miserably, at the little ugly unlit gas-stove. There was a long silence.

"Paul," she said, "if I married you, where should we be in ten years' time? I should be over fifty . . ."

"What does that matter?"

"You'd be thirty-five."

"Well? There'll never be anyone else for me, if that's what you're thinking of."

"You say that now."

"I know it. There's been Audrey and you. There won't be anyone else."

"Who can say that?"

"I need you." He turned to her again.

"If you want us to go back to where we were in New York . . ." she began.

"I don't," he interrupted. "I want you to marry me. I want you in my life for always. Surely all this has bound us together? There isn't anything can separate us. I want to be with you for always."

"You want children," she said. "I can't give you those."

"What do I want children for?"

"My dear . . ."

"It's you I want. Elinor! Elinor!" He knelt on the chair, his hands reaching up to her shoulders. "Won't you try? Won't you? Won't you try?"

She felt suddenly faint, exhausted, with the strain of all this. Her brain ceased to reason. She knew merely that she must end it, if only for the moment, this pleading

that was draining her. She looked into his eyes. He saw her weakening, and renewed his assault.

"Say you'll think about it," he begged. "Say you'll try. Don't turn me down utterly. Say you'll try."

There was a silence while they stared at each other, and then her eyes closed wearily and her head dropped forward.

"All right," she murmured. "I'll try."

He fell against her breast, and she held him there.

"God bless you!" he whispered. "God bless you! I'll deserve it. I swear I'll deserve it."

## XVII

WHEN she thought of it, it appeared fantastic and incredible. They had not spoken of it again, but, somehow, it seemed accepted that when this was over they would marry. It could not be for nearly a year at least; the case would not, in all probability, be heard this side of the Long Vacation, and after that there would be the six months between the decrees. She told herself that much might happen in a year, that this thing would never come to pass, yet, deep in her, she believed it would, that really and truly she would marry him.

When she had said that she would try, she had meant little more than that she would think of it, try to see it as less of an impossibility, but they had drifted now to a tacit understanding of it as an accepted thing. She had given it much thought, wakefully, at night. It was wrong, utterly and completely wrong, from every point of view but one: the good that it might do Paul. For her, he was worse than useless, a drag on her, a perpetual responsibility and care, selfish, exacting, self-considering, giving nothing in return. The marriage could give her nothing, nothing that she as a woman might hope for from a man; he was no longer even a lover in whom she could rejoice. Yet all of that seemed unimportant. The hope, the remote, sentimental dream that she had kept, almost unadmitted, in her heart of one day finding in marriage the quietude and security that she longed for, she abandoned almost happily, as though glad to be rid of it, face to face at least with certainty, whatever certainty, instead of the fear that had, for the past ten years, been growing on her in the realisation that she was alone, the fear that she would always be alone. She had known that dream dying; she could put it from her for ever now. There was in this, perhaps, a certain

luxury of self-sacrifice, and a remote Puritan joy in expiation and punishment for sin which belonged to an odd corner of her psychology; but she believed, too, honestly and genuinely believed, that it would be best for Paul.

For him it was all different. It was not the marriage that he should make, a boy of twenty-five; but that had been his marriage with Audrey, which she herself had broken, for so again she had come to see it. But if he wanted her, if, by marrying him, she could give him shelter, save him from his desperation, give him another human being on whom to build his life, since, in his weakness, he seemed incapable of building it alone, surely she owed him that? She had reverted to self-accusation, feeling she owed him reparation. "After all," she told herself, "I bought this thing. I'll pay for it." Her guilt or his, it was their adultery which had brought them to this, and she must stand by it. If she could make a man of him she would have done something in her life which she could see as its justification, and she resolved, then, that if in a year's time he were still of the same mind, she would go through with it. If, later, as she felt almost inevitable, someone else should come into his life, then she must let him go; he would, at least, have had her help and her support until that happened, and she might by then have set him on his feet. That, as she saw it, was her job, the job that life had curiously forced on her, and she accepted it.

They had become lovers again. Paul, with the change in their relations, began to wake once more to vitality and belief in himself, to think of work again, planning another play. Not so with Elinor; with the exception of half a dozen mechanical articles on America, commissioned by a weekly paper, she did not work at all. She could not. When she was in New York the idea for a new novel had come to her, but she could not write it now. Once or twice she made a start, drafting some four or five thousand words, but they displeased her and were destroyed. Angie had been unable to return to her, being required in a domestic crisis concerning

servants, small children and scarlet fever at home; and when her articles were done she dismissed the temporary secretary she had employed, for lack of work to give her.

As far as she could she resumed her old life and brought Paul into it, taking him about with her. Nobody asked who he was, or why he was there; for years Elinor had been in the habit of taking people with her wherever she went, people whom she wanted to see and to talk to, which, in the rush of her life, could only be achieved, apparently, in taxis between the appointments to which they accompanied her. "Come with me, I've only got to go to the dressmaker, and say how-do-you-do to Richard and Brenda for a second at tea, and look in at Winkie's for a cocktail. It won't take half an hour, and they'll love to meet you." Such was frequently the order of Elinor's speech.

To Hermione she gave more details, because of her confidence on the boat. She regretted, now, having told her; Hermione would be unlikely to keep it to herself, however much she might mean to do so; it was bound to get passed on, forgetfully, in gossip; and she certainly would be entirely out of sympathy and patience with Elinor's present attitude, as indeed she proved herself to be, telling her that she must be stark, staring mad to dream of marrying Paul, pointing out all the disadvantages which Elinor had already thought of and dismissed, and a great many more, based on expediency and the look of the thing, and what the world would say and think, which seemed to Elinor unimportant. But she was, fortunately perhaps for Elinor, very busy with her shop and her ambitions just at the moment, and unable to take any very deep interest in her or her affairs.

"Well, if you must, I suppose you must," she said, at length. "It's the sort of crazy thing you always have done, and you never have cared in the least what people thought of you. I quite agree that you ought to marry again—I've thought so for years—but you should marry someone with money and position, so that you don't have to racket around the way you do. You can't afford to go on like that for ever. Anyway, you can't get married

for nearly a year, and anything may have happened by then."

"I'm not broadcasting it," said Elinor. "You needn't talk about it to Nancy or Cynthia or anybody."

"Darling, as if I should! I wouldn't dream of such a thing!"

With the others, everything appeared to be going on much as usual. Winkie's projected baby had long been forgotten and, when Elinor asked after her plan of returning to the stage, she said:

"Darling, I decided I'd rather have dinner."

"What do you mean?" Elinor asked.

"Well, darling, you see, musical shows always begin at eight-fifteen, and that means being in the theatre at a quarter to, and that means having dinner at half-past six, or high-tea like they do in the provinces, and when I thought it over I jes' decided it wasn't good enough for ickle Winkie, after all these years of being a spoiled girl. So I turned down all the lovely contracts the little managers were waving in the air, and Goronwy and I dine at half-past eight every night when we don't go out, and I think of all the poor little girls dancing away on great big draughty stages that very minute, and it's a happy, grateful Winkie that tips her nice hot soup down her little throat."

Richard she saw from time to time. He was looking a great deal older and his face suggested that he had taken to drinking again. Brenda was very ill indeed. The second operation had revealed that the trouble was rapidly spreading; the surgeon had done all that he could, but was no longer hopeful of recovery. Richard seemed sunk in misery.

"Has it been any better," Elinor asked, "your being together again? How was Egypt?"

"Egypt was bloody," he answered shortly. "And, as for us, it was the same as ever, with the soft pedal down. There weren't any scenes, and I controlled myself, but it was like living with a ghost. The last two months she was in pain, and I had to watch her, dreading this operation, dreading what it would mean."

"Does she know how ill she is?"

"No. She believes it's going to be all right. I don't know how I'm going to stand all the horror of it. I want to run away and leave her. I can't bear seeing her like that. I know I shall be tempted to do something to put her out of her agony, if I stay. She's making plans for the summer and for next winter already. She wants to have the house re-decorated. I suppose I shall have to agree, so as not to let her suspect. What a mockery! And it seems to me now as though there were so much I might have done for her in the past, for both of us; I don't know what, but I feel I've behaved like a selfish cad from the beginning, and would give anything to have a chance to make our lives over again. Yet I felt that the first time, when I went back to her after the first operation, and there wasn't a thing I could do. It was just the same as ever. God, what a bloody world this is!"

Elinor echoed the sentiment in her own heart. The world seemed brutal and filled with tragedy, tragedy largely of their own making, people like Winkie seeming only to be there as comic relief to intensify the agony. Nancy contributed to the general effect two days after Elinor's return, when her son Derek was taken suddenly ill during his holidays and had to undergo a mastoid operation. Nancy collapsed completely; Sam was away, travelling on business in the East, and it was to Elinor that she turned for support, making her come and stay in Lowndes Street during the critical days, demanding her company at all times, growing hysterical and giving way to wild fits of weeping.

"I'll never, never, never be able to repay you for what you've done for me," she sobbed, when the boy had been pronounced out of danger. "If you'd still been in America when this happened, I should have gone clean off my head. None of the others are any good when you really want them; they've all got their own affairs; they haven't any use for you when you're in trouble. 'Laugh and the world laughs with you, weep and you weep alone'; I've always thought how

true that was! You're the exception that proves the rule."

Elinor was glad if she had been of comfort to Nancy, but the strain of looking after her and of trying to control her hysteria was a severe one, which left her worn out. For three nights she had had no sleep at all, because Nancy had insisted on her sharing her room, and had talked until dawn to keep her mind off Derek. Sam, when he returned, summoned by frenzied cables, thanked her with embarrassment for having looked after Nancy, and gave her a diamond brooch, muttering something about "recognition of her kindness." Nancy took Derek to the south of France to recuperate.

In the spate of Nancy's talk during the wakeful nights that she lay beside her, Elinor had absorbed a good deal of news and gossip, and one piece of information, in particular, had emerged which startled her.

"Oh, darling," Nancy said suddenly, "I've been seeing a friend of yours this winter, a Mrs. Anthony. You've never told me about her."

"How did you come to meet her?" Elinor asked in surprise.

"At tea somewhere in Hampstead. She lives there, you know. Oh, but of course you know. It was at a bridge-party—the wife of one of Sam's city friends; and she was there, and then I asked her to lunch and bridge one day, and she saw your photo in my boudoir. Wasn't it a coincidence? Really, the world is very small. I saw quite a lot of her until she went abroad. She's a nice woman and she plays a very good game. She raves over you."

Elinor felt a pang of annoyance over this. She could not exactly say why, but she wished that it had not happened. She wanted to keep her friendship with Mrs. Anthony and Evelyn apart from the rest of her life; Nancy had a habit of talking to strangers in a way which might be dangerous in a case like this; she had no discretion and was apt to make trouble.

Evelyn she had seen almost immediately on her return.



"Oh, God, I'm glad you're back, Elinor," she said, "and that you staged your return during the holidays. You don't know how damnable Christmas was without you as a refuge. I used to go for long walks and come past your Mews here, and howl with depression at the sight of it. Your letters were marvellous, only there weren't enough of them. As a matter of fact, there couldn't be. Well, anyway, now you *are* home, and thank God for it! You're not going back again, are you?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, look here, I want you to help me plan my future."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, what am I going to do when I leave school? That'll be this summer. Mother's got a theory that I ought to have some occupation, and she's talking about my going to Bedford College. Well, I think I ought to have an occupation, too. I certainly don't want to sit around and lead the life of the 'thoroughly nice girl,' as the Hampstead phrase is, playing tennis and going to dances with 'thoroughly nice young men,' until the thoroughly nicest of them all proposes and I marry him. But that's what it is; that's what the daughters of all mother's friends do."

"But you want to get married, don't you?"

"Yes, I suppose so, if . . ." She hesitated.

"If the right man comes along?" Elinor said, laughingly.

"Exactly!" Evelyn laughed too. "How brilliant of you to know what I meant! But if he comes along he might just as well find me doing something as sitting around at home and playing a sort of mental 'tisn't you, 'tisn't you,' to every young man I meet."

"I agree."

"But going to Bedford College for a few hours every day doesn't seem to me much of a solution."

"What do you want to do?"

"That's what I'd like to know. Something interesting. Something where I'd meet interesting people. Mother said something about a journalistic course, but that's

no good. I'd like to get on to a paper, but I know I can't write. If I learned shorthand and typing, could you get me a job as secretary to an editor or an author?"

"I might."

"I wish you would. I'd like to be *your* secretary, but I suppose that wouldn't work; we know each other too well. I want an interesting life. I want to meet people who do things. If it wasn't for you I wouldn't have a chance. I'd be stuck in Hampstead and all that set, and never meet anyone at all."

"I'll talk to your mother about it," Elinor promised.

"Tell me, how's Jack?"

"Very mysterious."

"What do you mean?"

Evelyn hesitated a moment, and then plunged.

"There's something I've been wanting to ask you," she said. "Tell me, do you know a woman called Myra Molyneux?"

"No. Who is she?"

"She draws. Things for the illustrated papers. Nasty anæmic-looking men and women sporting about among cypresses and things."

"Oh yes, I believe I've seen them. Why?"

"Well, she seems to have got hold of Jack. Elinor, she's awful. She looks as if she's been tipped out of the dirty-clothes basket. She's forty if she's a day, and she's got blood-orange hair, and oh, she's an awful mess. I believe she's Jack's mistress."

"What makes you think so?"

"Oh, things. I think it's beastly. How *can* he? Elinor, do you understand these things?"

"What things?"

"Things like that. Oh, it's not the morality of it that I'm worrying about. I've no morals. . . ." Elinor laughed. "If he were in love with her I wouldn't say a word—at least, I don't think I should—but he can't be. A nasty, messy, studio vamp like that. It's just . . . beastly. I never thought Jack was like that. Elinor, it can't be right. You don't approve of it, do you, all that sort of thing? Promiscuousness, and . . . oh, you know."

"I know," said Elinor. "No, darling, I don't approve of it."

"Then I'm right? You think as I do. It is beastly?"

"Beastly's a strong word."

"You haven't seen her," Evelyn remarked, "or you wouldn't say that. I tell you, it isn't the morality of it; I know men have affairs . . . at least, I believe they do . . . and if two people love each other, I suppose it doesn't matter. But this sort of thing . . . you say you don't approve of it . . . aren't I right to be disgusted? Surely decency counts for something?"

"Yes, but wait a minute," Elinor put in. "I don't want to discuss Jack and his affairs, it's not my business, and, anyway, you can't be sure you're right. But these things in general . . . I'm not trying to defend them to you, but I don't want you to be shocked like this."

"If you're going to say that all men do it . . ."

Evelyn began tempestuously, but Elinor checked her.

"I wasn't," she said, almost sharply, and then made her voice kindly and sympathetic, dealing tenderly with her. "But suppose you look at it like this. You say that if two people love each other, then it's all right. But love doesn't happen to everybody, and everybody can't wait for it, anyway. Men, especially. But suppose, instead, they find what they call romance? Glamour, excitement . . . what people go to the theatre and the cinema to find, what they read novels for, most of them . . . suppose it's that?"

"Myra Molyneux's not romance."

"We weren't talking about her. And, anyway, how do you know? She may be . . . to Jack. She may represent whatever it is he finds so attractive in his Bohemian set that you've told me about. That's his romance for him. You may call it unfastidious. You may disapprove of it on that score . . ."

"I should jolly well think I do."

"Then it's his taste you're complaining of?" Elinor smiled.

"No, it's something more than that. It's the whole 'idea of the thing.'"

"And you're the child that reads D. H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley!" she laughed.

"I know." Evelyn looked at her appealingly. "But in books it's different somehow. It doesn't seem so real there; but when it's someone you know . . ." She broke off. "I see what you mean about romance . . . at least, I suppose I do, but . . ."

She went on trying to explain herself, coming up each time against the attempt that she was making to rationalise the emotion that her discovery had awakened in her, her attempt to square it with some sort of superficial sophistication, acquired from her reading. The "love justifies all" attitude which she was parading was something she had learned almost as a formula; she had had no experience to enable her in any way to test it, and this, her first actual contact with a sexual relation in real life, had profoundly disturbed her, causing her to review all that she had ever believed that she believed. In the end she jettisoned all her talk and her attitudes, and confessed that she found the whole thing disgusting, whatever books might say, and that she didn't see how Elinor could possibly defend it from any angle, romance or no romance, and that, anyway, there was nothing romantic about Myra Molyneux.

Evelyn had returned to school now for her final term, and Elinor had received a letter from Mrs. Anthony, written from San Remo:

"Dear Miss Johnson [it ran], Evelyn has written me that you are home and that she has seen you, and I hasten to send you this line of welcome to add to all those which you have no doubt already received. I hope that you had a very pleasant and prosperous time in America.

"I have been away since the end of February, which was a perfectly dreadful month in England, spending a few weeks first of all with my second sister in Florence, where it was colder than I have ever known it, and then coming on here, where it is perfectly delightful. My sister is with me now.

"Why do you not come to these parts yourself? The weather is like midsummer, and the scenery most lovely. I am sure you would find it congenial here and that you would

be able to work easily in such beautiful surroundings. I need not say how much pleasure it would give me if you could think of burdening yourself with my society by joining me somewhere on this coast. My sister has to leave me in a week or so, and I shall be quite alone. *Do think of it.*

"During the winter I met a very charming friend of yours, a Mrs. Rossiter, and played bridge with her several times. I have just heard from her that her boy has been seriously ill and that she is with him now at Hyères, where she has suggested my joining her later. I am thinking that I may perhaps do so.

"Jack passed his Intermediate examination (Solicitors') in January, but Evelyn probably wrote or told you all about it. She was so delighted with your letters from America. Really, you spoil her with your attention!

"With every good wish and kind regards.—Yours sincerely,  
Margaret Anthony."

The suggestion of going abroad appealed to Elinor, who was finding London and her incapacity to work there very irksome. She was half inclined to consider joining Mrs. Anthony, and had even written, making tentative plans, when the institution of the divorce suit sent everything spinning. "That's going to be no fun with Evelyn and her mother when it gets into the papers," she thought. She supposed that it was foolish of her to care so much, but the idea of what they were going to think worried her almost more than any other aspect of the case. Her recent conversation with Evelyn over the question of adultery returned, frighteningly, to her mind. How was she ever going to explain the circumstances of the divorce to her? The whole notion of the suit, indeed, was something which she found herself curiously unable to grasp; it went beyond the logic of her mind. Half the time she caught herself behaving as though it did not exist, forgetting it almost, unable to believe in it, and then would wake up in the night, suddenly appalled at the idea of it, burst new upon her. She could not envision it and all its possibilities; it seemed incredible.

All the same, she was disliking London considerably, and felt that if she got away she might perhaps be able

to concentrate on work instead of fiddling away her days with minor occupations which were tolerable only when they came as distractions from her writing, not, as now, when they formed the bulk of her existence. She thought of the cottage at East Dean; but Paul would be a difficulty there. It was obvious that he must come with her wherever she went; he would not remain in London without her.

She suggested to him, therefore, that they should go abroad.

"There's nothing I should like better than to get away," Paul said, "but I can't afford it."

"It wouldn't cost us much," said Elinor. "We can go to some tiny place in France where you can do marvels on fifty francs a day."

"That's all very well," said Paul, "but what about fares? Besides, there's the rent of the flat going. I can't afford to waste that, and I don't imagine I could let it very easily."

"Listen, Ponky," said Elinor. "There's something we've got to talk about some time, and that's the question of money. If you and I are going to get married, we've got to do something about it."

It was the first time the question of their marriage had been raised since the afternoon in his flat.

"What?" asked Paul.

"Well, we shall have to come to some arrangement. My own income isn't large, and I'm pretty dependent on what I make, but it's a good deal more than yours, my lambie. However, we needn't go into all that now. I only raised it because I've got to help you along for a bit. . . ."

"I wish to God you hadn't."

"I'd just as soon, myself, for your sake. But never mind that. Let's hope it won't be for long. As for this present trip, see if you can let your flat; if you can, all well and good, but in any case you'll let me pay the fares and any extras beyond your living. You can do that all right on what it will cost. I tell you what; have you ever been to Corsica?"

"No, I've always wanted to."

"Well, I know the divinest little place, where we can live like fighting-cocks for forty francs a day. And we'll bathe, and go for walks, and lie in the lovely hot sun, and work our heads off. What about it?"

They left London in the middle of June and went down to Marseilles, where they took the boat. The town was blazing with a fierce, white, staring sunlight that beat up from the pavements into their faces. The air was blistering. In the afternoon they went out to a bathing establishment and swam in warm, dirty-looking, enclosed sea-water, lying out afterwards on a hot walled promenade, surrounded by women who looked as though they had come off French postcards, and men who wore nets over their hair.

"What a foul place," said Paul, who had cut his toes on the rocks and was trying to stop the blood, running in wet, veinlike channels over his feet, with a very moist handkerchief.

"Never mind," said Elinor. "Lovely, lovely sand and a beach almost to ourselves, the day after tomorrow."

In the evening they walked about the old port, crazy, ruinous and romantic, in a hot blue twilight, and dined at a tiny restaurant, where Elinor ordered bouillabaisse.

"In God's name, you don't eat that stuff, do you?" Paul cried.

"In God's name, I do, darling. I don't come all this way to Marseilles and go without my bouillabaisse for anyone on earth. Don't you like it?"

"I've never dared try it. It looks so terrifying."

"You have a spoonful of mine, my pretty, and see if you don't like it. Come on: open mouthy! There! Well?"

"It's interesting," said Paul, debating the flavour with himself. "Give me some more."

"Aha! What did I tell you? Gaston has it in London sometimes on Fridays. I ordered it once when I had Lydia Walsh and another woman lunching with me,

and they said they'd like to try it. So they ordered one portion between them, ate a little bit, said, 'It's very tasty,' and sent for some cold meat."

"Tasty is right," said Paul, helping himself to some more.

"Do you like garlic?" Elinor asked suddenly.

"I'm afraid I do, rather," Paul admitted. "Personally, that is, not vicariously."

"You needn't be afraid," said Elinor. "I don't know what we'd have done, if you hadn't. I can't imagine how I forgot to ask you before we came away. It's terribly important on a holiday like this. Let's have a lovely garlicky salad, now."

After dinner they sat at a café in the Canebière, watching the shifting crowd, and walked again beside the water, shiny like patent leather, with reflected lights in it.

They spent six weeks in Corsica, living in a flavourous pension on the quay of a little town which looked as though it had been designed by Picasso as a backcloth for the Russian Ballet, painted in hard, bright colours of white, pink and blue. There were palms along the quay, and a series of small cafés separated by archways, and tall, dark, mysterious flights of steps leading to the narrow, tortuous streets which wound up to the high citadel. From there one looked across the fierce, staring blue of the bay to mountains over which the sun set nightly in stupendous colourings of flame and gold and purple, turning their bare greyiness to a soft rose. In one of the cafés was a noisy electric piano that played five-year-old tunes from American musical comedies, and in the half-light of the evening the men of the little town, dark and sullen young fishermen, danced together to its music on a tiny square of the concrete floor.

Elinor and Paul spent their time as she had predicted, lying on the baking silver-coloured sand, bathing in the pellucid stillness of the bay, and walking the hot, dusty roads with the mâquis carrying to them its mingled fragrances of myrtle, thyme, lavender and eucalyptus; mounting up through hillside almond orchards, picking



from the trees as they went, and biting into the soft, feathered velvet coverings of the nuts; and in the evenings climbing the headland behind the citadel, where the coast-line suddenly became wild and rocky, reminiscent of Cornwall, and the air was filled with the hot, aromatic scent, like curry powder, from the little dried-up yellow flower that grew everywhere, whose name nobody could tell them. They ate largely and well of strong-tasting food, and drank the hard, coarse local wine, and worked regularly for three or four hours a day, he at a new play, and she on her novel, which was beginning to take shape in her hands.

On the whole they were very happy. There were times when Elinor saw on Paul's face, as he sat staring at all this beauty around them, a shadow and a kind of brooding in his eyes which told her that he was thinking of Audrey and of all that he had lost. He would very occasionally turn moody for hours on end, scarcely speaking, so that she would think desperately that all this was impossible, and resolve to end it; and then, in bed that night, he would turn to her and draw her to him, telling her how he thanked God for her, and fall asleep comforted, while she lay staring at the ceiling wakefully, with a strange, half-bitter tenderness for him, this child whom she seemed always to be leading by the hand wherever now she went. That was how she thought of him, and of herself almost as a kind of governess or auntie, but at least she seemed successful in her ministrations; she found Paul, on the whole, easier and more simple than she had ever known him, with neither the gloom that she had seen in London and New York, nor the too exuberant gaiety of the first days of their loving.

At the end of six weeks his play was finished, and Elinor liked it better than anything she had read of his. Moreover, it was the first thing he had written which seemed to her to have the ingredients necessary for a popular success. She praised it to him highly, and he was overjoyed. That evening, as they sat at dinner, Paul was reading the *Paris Daily Mail*, the only English

paper that they saw, and suddenly looked up, saying excitedly:

"I say, Myers is in Paris. I wonder if I could catch him and show him the play now. He promised he'd read anything I wrote."

"Send it to him," said Elinor.

"I daren't risk it. It's the only manuscript; I daren't trust it to the post. Besides, if I did, the chances are he'd never look at it, just put it away with a heap of others. I ought to see him personally. I wonder how long he's staying."

"Does it give his hotel? Well, send him a wire and find out." -

While Paul dashed off in haste to send his telegram, Elinor took up the paper, looking down the lists of arrivals in Paris hotels. Among them, to her surprise, she saw the name of Richard Gilchrist. She had not heard from him since her departure, and wondered what he was doing in Paris. She went on to the news of the Riviera, where she found a great many familiar names. Half of New York seemed to be at Antibes and Juan-les-Pins—all the novelists and playwrights she had met; Lois Fane had arrived at the Hôtel du Cap; Mr. and Mrs. Morris Baird had been among those present at a dinner in Monte Carlo.

Paul received an answering telegram the next evening, telling him that the New York manager, Myers, was going to London and could see him there.

"I say," he cried, "I do feel I ought to go back. I suppose it's only a thousand-to-one chance, but half the American theatre is in London or Paris just now and, if I can get the play typed quickly, I can push it around much more easily if I'm on the spot myself. What do you say?"

"Just as you like, Ponky." Elinor looked up from a letter she was reading. "Yes, I suppose you ought to go."

"Will you come with me, or do you want to stay on and work?"

"I'll come with you, I think. At least, I'll tell you

what. Would you mind awfully if we took the boat to Nice and I stayed around the Riviera for a few days? You can go straight through to London, and I'll join you in about a week. There are lots of people I'd like to say how-do-you-do to. I see Carl West's at Antibes, and all that crowd. Nancy's taken a villa at Cap Ferrat for the summer, and Tom and Cynthia are supposed to be somewhere around. This is from Hermione; she says she's going down to stay with Nancy."

"Then no Riviera for me," laughed Paul. "I don't know why everybody always wants to go to the same place. It seems to me they might just as well stay in London. Lydia Walsh has rented a villa near St. Raphaël."

"Well, if you don't mind, I think I'll send Nancy a wire." She returned to her letter and suddenly ejaculated: "Good God!"

"What's up?"

"Brenda's dead!"

"Who's Brenda?"

"Brenda Gilchrist. Oh, I forgot, you don't know them. I always take it for granted that everyone knows everyone."

"Who was she? Friend of yours?"

"Dick is. Her husband. I wrote to him last night. I saw he was in Paris, but I didn't know anything about this. I must write again. Poor Dick."

They left two days later. Despite the apparently halcyon weather, the crossing, which took all night, was rough and unpleasant. Paul, who was a bad sailor, took a double dose of Mothersill and was very sleepy and disgruntled when they arrived at Nice at half-past five in the morning. The town was asleep in an early haze that predicted intense heat later in the day, and they awakened a small hotel that Elinor knew, where they were given a double bedroom with a bath. Paul threw himself on the bed, fully dressed, and went straight to sleep, refusing to stir for breakfast. Elinor woke him at half-past eleven; he bathed and shaved, after which they lunched, and she put him on the train at half-past two.

"Good-bye, darling," she said. "And good luck. I'll be back in ten days at the outside."

He kissed her affectionately.

"Don't be any longer," he bade her. "It's been perfectly wonderful. I do adore you."

The train steamed out. Elinor went back to the hotel and hired a car, to take her on a round of calls along the coast.

She reached Nancy's villa at half-past four. A butler took her through an ornate drawing-room on to a wide terrace, from which there were steps leading down to the sea.

"Hullo-oh!" she cried, and then stopped in amazement at the group she saw. Nancy, Hermione, Winkie, Ham Sotherington and another young man, Gus and Lady Sybil, were lounging in pyjamas and bathing-suits, drinking iced tea. They leaped up at her appearance, and squeals resounded.

It was a long time before she could hear anything; everyone talked violently and at once, shouting at her, asking questions and not waiting for the answers.

"Where are you stopping? How long are you staying? Why didn't you let us know you were coming this afternoon? Have you seen Tom and Cynthia? They're at Juan. Winkie and Hermione are staying with me here. Ham's with Gus and Sybil at Cap d'Ail. Oh, by the way, let me introduce Rupert Lovelace. The Morris Bairds are having a party on Tuesday; they're at Antibes; we must ring them up and tell them you're here. Where have you been? What's Corsica like? Is it marvellous? Did you see anyone you knew? Darling, this is too, too, too wonderful; you must stay for ever and ever and ever. What on earth made you choose Nice of all awful places? Elinor, you *are* extraordinary!"

Gradually she got it all sorted out. The Riviera was like a hive, but Nancy was in her element. She had got to know everybody, threw Christian names around with an elaborate carelessness, and was entertaining violently. She was so terribly sorry she could not put Elinor up, but Derek was there, and Winkie and Hermione had

the only spare-rooms. Lady Sybil pressed her to come and stay with them, and Gus seconded the invitation. He had said very little, but had watched the scene of greeting with a faintly malicious grin. Elinor made evasive excuses.

"You're very naughty," Lady Sybil said. "You never came to see us after you got home from America."

"How on earth has all this happened?" Elinor asked Hermione, when she got her alone.

"All what?"

"Well, everybody being here like this. Gus and his wife, how do they come in?"

"They've got a villa for the summer. You know what the Riviera is, this time of year."

"I didn't know Nancy knew them."

"You brought Gus to her party, don't you remember? That's enough for Nancy, and she's got the best bathing beach this side of Antibes. As a matter of fact, I think Winkie's got rather a *béguin* for Gus."

"Winkie?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if Winkie isn't sickening for an affair. Gus doesn't seem unwilling, though he's also been showing signs towards your Lois Fane lady. Still, Winkie's on the spot, which gives her an advantage. I always used to wonder whether you and he . . . Oh, tell me, where's Paul?"

"Gone back to London." Elinor felt suddenly sick.

"I'm only staying a day or two. Tell me about Brenda."

"Well, it was all terribly sudden. A clot of blood or something, after they'd moved her from the nursing-home."

"Did you see Richard?"

"No. I rang up and sent flowers and wrote to him, and got the usual printed card. I asked him to come and see me, but he didn't answer. I heard he'd been drinking again, and Ham said he saw him at a party the night of the funeral, absolutely blind drunk."

"I don't believe it!" Elinor flamed.

"Darling, he's been impossible that way for years, I don't see why not. He'll probably drink himself to

death in six months now, and I must say that I can't see it'll be anybody's loss."

Elinor changed the subject, unable to trust herself to argue calmly.

"Where's Norman?" she asked.

"At Blankenberghe, darling, of all peculiar places. He seems to spend nearly all his time in Belgium these days. I think he must have found something! Betsy's at Carlsbad."

From Nancy, Elinor learned that Mrs. Anthony had spent a month with her at Hyères in the earlier part of the summer.

"You ought to stay down here, darling," Nancy persuaded her. "It's ever such fun, and we've seen a lot of your New York crowd, too. It's absurd of you to go back to London now, when there isn't a soul there. It's just the way you always manage things. Aren't Gus and Sybil darlings? He and Winkie have been having a lot of tennis; he's teaching her to aquaplane."

Elinor returned to Nice that night, resolved to go back to London immediately. The afternoon and evening had revolted her; the atmosphere was laden with moneyed intrigue and callousness. Somehow it all disgusted her now as never before, massed together here in concentrated form against the exotic beauty of the background, artificial, tainted with corruption, like a young, enamelled mask on the face of an elderly raddled harlot. Hermione's remarks about Richard; Winkie and Gus and Lois Fane; Nancy's foolish snobbery; it all sickened her. She could not stay another day.

But in the morning she bethought herself of the Americans at Antibes, and of Tom and Cynthia whom she had not seen. She telephoned to Morris Baird, and went to lunch with him and Julia, spending the afternoon and evening with Carl West and the remainder of the New York set. She saw Lois, who was very sweet to her, having apparently forgotten their differences in America. Morris Baird was bringing her to London in *Little Miss Millionaire* in the autumn; she begged Elinor to write her a plan with which to follow it.

Tom and Cynthia lunched with Elinor at the Negresco the following day; she was catching the afternoon train to Paris. On her way along the Promenade des Anglais she ran into Roly.

"It only needed you!" she cried. "What are you doing here?"

"Painting up at La Turbie. I've come in for the day. I didn't know you were around. I say, old girl, what's this I hear about your marrying again?"

"What's that?" she said, aghast.

"I heard a rumour that you were marrying some boy scene-painter that you'd met in America. Isn't it true?"

"Who told you?" she demanded.

"I can't remember. Oh, wait a minute. It was at a party somewhere. Now, who was it told me? Could it have been young Sotherington, the decorator chap? I met him this summer."

"It could," said Elinor, savagely.

So Hermione had talked. She might have known it. Did that mean that they all knew—Nancy, Gus, Winkie, the whole damned lot of them? Nancy, now that she reflected on it, had been remarkably incurious about her trip to Corsica, had not even asked whether she had gone alone. She would certainly have been playfully inquisitive, coyly hinting at hidden romances, unless she had known something. Anger and disgust rose up in her again, and then she shook them off. They would all have to know some day; it might as well be now. She only wished that she had spoken of it herself; she had no desire to appear secretive. She was damned if she was going to seem ashamed of it.

Tom and Cynthia said nothing at lunch, but when he and she were alone together for a moment, he took her arm and asked:

"Everything all right, Nell?"

"Sure," she replied. "Why? Why do you ask?"

"Nothing."

"Don't I look all right?"

"You look grand. Better than I've seen you for ages."

What did that mean? What did he know? All the way on the train she chafed and fretted, hating the whole lot of them, hating herself. She thought of Gus and Winkie. Did Winkie know that she had been Gus's mistress? Did Sybil know? Hermione apparently did not. Oh, to hell with it! Why should she care what any of them thought? But she did care. All night in the *wagon-lit* she did not sleep.

She decided to stay in Paris and try to see Richard. She rang up his hotel and was told that he had left; they did not know where he had gone. She had not had time for an answer to her letters; his replies, if he had written any, must have gone to Corsica and would follow, or even, perhaps, precede her to London. She contemplated catching the "Golden Arrow" and going straight home, but she felt tired after her sleepless night, too tired to undertake another journey that day. She closed the window and the shutters of her hotel bedroom, drawing the curtains, and lay down on the bed to sleep; it was afternoon when she awoke, with a headache, which she decided to try and walk off. Near the Madeleine she met some people who had entertained her in Kansas City, people in whose house she had stayed. They greeted her delightedly, insisted on her dining and going with them to the theatre that night. After the theatre they went on to the *Grand Ecart*, where she met other friends, mostly Americans, clamorous in their welcome. She stayed in Paris three days, forgetting the Riviera.

She had wired Paul the time of her train, and he was at Victoria to meet her. He kissed her as she descended from the train, found a taxi and told the driver to open it. She thought, as she stood with him while the porter was collecting her bags, that there was something strange about him, as though he were withholding some unpleasant news. Had Myers turned down his play, she wondered? The suspicion of something being amiss grew to conviction as they drove to Kensington. He asked her questions about the Riviera and of what she had done in Paris, volunteering no information about himself.



"Have you seen Myers?" she asked him at last.

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I left the play with him. It only came back from the typist yesterday. He's promised to read it at once. I've sent it to a London manager, too—Harpenden."

So it was not that. What could have happened? She asked him no more questions until they reached her flat. It was nearly seven o'clock, and Mrs. Moggridge was hovering.

"You didn't say in your telegram whether you'd be wanting supper, Miss? Can I run out and get you something?"

"Is there anything in the larder?"

"Well, no, Miss—not to say anything, really. Just some bread and butter and cheese I got in, and some sausages I cooked this morning and let get cold, the way you like them. There's some eggs, but I can easily slip across and get a couple of chops."

"Don't bother," said Elinor. "The sausages and eggs will do. If we want anything more we'll go out."

"It's no bother, Miss," the housekeeper replied. "I'm in no particular hurry to get home for an hour or two."

"It doesn't matter, Mrs. Moggridge."

She was anxious to be alone with Paul. Mrs. Moggridge went, and Elinor produced Vermouth bottles from the cupboard.

"Now, Ponky," she said, as she handed him his glass, "what's the trouble?"

"Trouble?"

"Well, you're looking a bit old-fashioned like," she said, lightly. "What is it? Tell Elinor."

He put down his glass.

"There's something I want to talk to you about," he said.

"Yes?"

"This marriage business of ours . . ."

"Well?"

"Audrey came to see me two days ago."

She stared at him.

" Oh? What did she want? "

He was silent for a moment, fidgeting with the base of his glass on the table, looking down at his fingers. Suddenly she knew what was coming.

" She wants me to go back to her," he said at last.

" I see," she answered, quietly.

" Apparently it's been her mother all this time who's been holding her to it, just as you thought. Not in the beginning, of course, but almost ever since. It appears they had an awful row the other day, and . . ." He stopped.

" In other words, she never wanted to divorce you? "

" Never for long, apparently. Oh, at first, yes. She was angry and hurt, but now . . ." Again he could not continue.

" She came to see you, you say? "

" Yes. At least . . . "

" At least? "

" Well, I saw her in the street from the flat. I was looking out of the window, and she was walking up and down outside. And then she looked up, and . . . well, I talked to her from the window, and then she came up, and . . . she told me she'd had this row with her mother, that she'd left home . . . "

" And that she wanted you to go back to her? "

" Yes. At least, she asked if I'd forgive her. She said she wanted to drop the divorce, unless, of course, I wanted it. . . . She couldn't stand it any longer. She cried."

" And *you* said? "

" That I'd talk to you." He looked up at her for the first time.

" That you'd——? " Her voice failed in astonishment.

" You want to go back to her? "

" I want to do the right thing by *you*."

" By me? "

" Yes," he stammered. " Personally, I should think you'd be glad to be rid of me. I'm no good to you, I know. But I've put you in this position, and . . . "

" Listen," she interrupted him, sharply. " You want

to go back to her. You still love her. Don't you? Don't you? Answer me, Paul. You still love her?"

For answer, he only hung his head.

"Then do you think *I'm* going to stand in your way? Do you think *I'm* going to keep you from her?"

"Elinor . . ."

"Go to her," she cried, her voice rising in anger that she was trying to stem. "Go back to her."

"But *you* . . .?"

"You needn't talk about me."

"I feel such a cad."

"That's not my fault."

"Need you take it like this? After all . . ."

"God, I've been a fool!" she cried. "To have bothered with you, to have cared for you! You can come to me and ask me if I mind . . .!"

"I never said that," he defended himself.

"Not in words, but why else did you tell me as you did, apologetically like that—asking if I'd let you go, asking my permission? Well, you have it. Go! Go back to her."

"Elinor!" He came towards her, pleadingly.

"No. Go, please! Go, now. I mean it." Still he hesitated. "Please, Paul. Leave me."

"I can't go like this. There's so much I've got to say . . ."

"Nothing."

"I'm grateful to you for so much."

"You can't talk of gratitude now. I want you to go. And I advise you not to tell Audrey how you told me, how I took it. She might not like it. She might have a conscience, too, and then where would you be? No, go! Don't make me go on saying things!"

He stared at her, and then very slowly went to the door. He opened it, and stood there a moment.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She looked him in the face.

"My God," she said slowly, as though in realisation, "the things you get that you don't deserve! Well, for God's sake, be happy this time, if you can!"

He returned her look.

"Won't you kiss me," he asked, "just for good luck?"

She laughed at that, but came towards him and kissed him. The kiss was meaningless.

"You're better without me," he said weakly, hesitated again, and then went.

She stood still, hearing him go downstairs.

## XVIII

THE following morning she received a letter from Richard, a note written on Paris hotel-paper, and forwarded from Corsica:

“ Dear Elinor [it ran], damn the *Daily Mail*, but thanks for your letters all the same. I can’t possibly write about anything. I’m leaving Paris in a couple of days, and going down to Venice and the Lido. I believe there are some people there. I’m in that state of mind when I couldn’t bear to see anyone whose opinion of me I care a damn about—hence the Lido, and hence why I’m not taking up your suggestion of meeting you somewhere. It’s frightfully good of you—but I couldn’t. Hence, also, why I can’t write.  
Richard.”

“ Poor Dick,” she said to herself, but she understood what he meant. There are times, she felt, when grief or suffering have hit so badly at self-respect that sympathy or affection become intolerable, because one feels them undeserved; when the only companionship one can bear is that of people to whom one is utterly indifferent, people whom one despises almost, the unimportance and insincerity of the relationship matching, the self-contempt and somehow protecting it. She was herself not far from such a mood at the moment, after all that she had endured for Paul; but why Richard should be experiencing it, since Brenda’s death was an honourable and legitimate sorrow, she did not know, unless the stories of his drinking had been unexaggerated, and he were feeling ashamed of himself on that score. She pitied him, but knew that for the present she was powerless to help him. She scribbled him a note, writing as lightly as she could make herself, asking him to look her up when he got back. She did not hear from him

again, though reports filtered back to her of his behaviour at the Lido and, later, elsewhere, and they were not reassuring.

Brenda's death, as Hermione had related, had been sudden. Momentarily, Richard had felt relief, relief at her being spared the long agony he had known to be awaiting her, the slow drifting down the dark, painful river of death, and at himself being spared the helpless horror of watching her dying before his eyes. But that was the comfort of reason, the cant consolation of the "merciful release," which, for all its truth, is somehow external only, or so he felt, leaving untouched, unsolaced beneath it the selfish greed that would have kept her alive at any cost. He had told Elinor that he was afraid of the temptation to end her sufferings himself, yet he knew now that he could never have done so, that an instinct deeper than his reason would have stopped him; that he might have run away, to be out of sight and out of hearing, but that he himself could never have killed her, just as now he could not, to the depths of him, take comfort in her death, knowing at his heart that he wished her still alive, alive and suffering even, knowing it while admitting its selfishness, unable to deny its truth.

The morning of her death was occupied with doctors, nurses and undertakers, an announcement sent to the *Times*, arrangements swiftly made. Everything was simple, smoothly oiled, impersonal; death was completely prepared for in this world. He sat in his library, fingering the unopened morning papers, staring blankly ahead of him, unable to think, while the nurses came and went in the room he was not yet allowed to enter.

Presently one of them came to him.

"You can go up now," she said. "She looks beautiful."

He thanked her and sat on, trying to master himself; then he went upstairs and down the little hall-way, standing a moment outside her room, his hand on the door, fearful to enter. How would she look? "Beautiful,"

the nurse had said. Beautiful? He turned the handle and went in.

The blinds were drawn, and the room smelt darkly of flowers. He would not look at the bed. But slowly his eyes turned towards it, and for a moment he thought that she was gone, that there was no one there. And then he saw her, slight and frail, frailer than he would have believed, but beautiful, so beautiful, her face and lips like faintly coloured marble, that his heart moved, seeming to turn over within him. Here was tranquillity beyond all imagining, a peace in which there were no doubts, no questionings, but only a calm certainty and assurance that made death seem a lovely and a blessed thing. His love for her rose, catching him by the throat, and he began to weep, falling on to his knees beside the bed. He stayed there a long time and then, raising himself, bent over and kissed her, gently, as he had kissed her in the nursing-home, and turned quietly and left the room, going back to the library, where tears overcame him once again, so that he sat at his desk and wept, his head on his arms, weeping luxuriously, happily almost, happy that he could weep at last.

He saw no one but his one friend Bill, to whom he telephoned the news, drawing comfort from his brief: "Oh, God, I'm sorry. Do you want to see me?", answering: "Yes, come round this evening, can you?" In the evening they sat together while Bill talked of other and irrelevant things, asking no questions, waiting for him to begin. His emotion had faded now, leaving only a blank wretchedness.

"What am I going to do with this place?" Richard asked at last.

"You've no plans?"

"Hardly. She only died this morning."

This was a stab at himself, at the memory of these last months, when to think of the future had seemed a treachery. Bill said nothing, but took a fistful of coins from his pocket, laying them along the palm of his hand, arranging them tails upwards and in order of size, listening while Richard talked of selling the house and

all his possessions, of going abroad or living in hotels or service flats; seeing in him the boy he had known at school, gentle, fastidious and reserved, grown now into a dark, unhappy man. It was past two when Bill left, and Richard saw him to the door, saying briefly, as he stood there: "Thanks for coming round." It was only when he got to bed and lay there, sleepless, that he felt grateful for him, wishing he had been more cordial.

The next two days passed blankly in a numbed, obstinate refusal to think or to face the future. He sat re-reading books he already knew almost by heart, so that his brain had no effort to make, the sense penetrating by a sort of mild action of memory and no more; or playing the piano, scarcely hearing what it was he played. He drank a good deal, he did not know how much, but there was always a glass beside him nearly empty, and when it grew quite empty he filled it. Letters came by the post, and he left them in a heap on his desk. He read the *Times* announcement a great many times, as though trying to appraise its literary style: "Brenda, wife of Richard Gilchrist." It looked nice, he thought.

The third day brought the funeral. In the little chapel of the Crematorium, listening to the Burial Service, emotion seized him again. The clergyman's voice, intoning, did its best to rob the words of meaning, but their poetry reached him, touching him against his will. He began to weep again, not luxuriously now, but terribly, torn by the sense of this beauty that he did not believe in, this promise of an after-life that he was so sure did not exist. Why torture him, why break him up with these lies and fables, when his own hopelessness seemed so much the most comforting thing?

The coffin began to move slowly on its little track, like a railway siding, towards the metal doors. His hands tightened on the pew-ledge before him, and he cried out: "No, no!", moved by a sudden dreadful vision of Brenda lying in the coffin as he had last seen her, an awful imagination of the flames waiting to consume her, her beauty, her hair and her lips and



her closed eyes. He felt Bill's hand on his arm, restraining him, and the coffin was gone. It was all over. He turned and walked straight out of the chapel, unseeing of the friends who stood around in little shamefaced groups, waiting to condole with him.

That evening he was alone. Bill was engaged with a family party, and there was no one else that he wanted to see. He walked about the house, unable to sit still, and at eight o'clock he went out. It was a hot summer evening; no rain had fallen for weeks, and the streets smelled of dust. He walked, without thinking of his direction, along the Embankment as far as the Vauxhall Bridge Road, where he turned up to Victoria and along Victoria Street, wide and empty now, up Whitehall, Charing Cross Road, Tottenham Court Road, and on yet farther, keeping straight now, up the Hampstead Road, with the light fading and the sky turning into a deep stone blue, pricked with the silver point of a star. He was scarcely aware of walking, certainly not of his surroundings; his movement was mechanical, but so long as he walked his fidgeting was kept at bay and he had no need to think. It was only slowly that fatigue brought him to consciousness of his body, and he looked about him, trying to see where he was. He had passed Chalk Farm Station and was mounting the rise of Haverstock Hill. He glanced at his wrist-watch, and saw that it was close on ten. He had not dined, but he felt no hunger, only a sudden dazed, awful weariness. He looked around him, and saw some studios standing back from the road, remembering that he knew a man who used to live there. He had not seen him for two years. Almost without thinking he went to the door and knocked.

"Good God, Gilchrist!" said the voice of the man he knew. "Come in. Years since I've seen you. This is a surprise."

He went into a large room filled with people. There appeared to be a party in progress. He saw one or two faces that he knew; Ham Sotherington was sprawling on the floor on a pile of cushions in a corner, and Roly

Ferguson was pouring out drinks at a side-table. He found himself being introduced to people, offered a humpty to sit on, and a stiff glass of whisky to drink. Afterwards he had no recollection of the evening, beyond the fact that someone had played on the spinet, that some *Bergerettes* had been sung, and that his glass of whisky had never seemed to be empty. He could not recall how he got home, although the memory of opening his own front door and coming into the little hall was clear enough. He could remember going into the dining-room and pouring out yet another whisky, drinking it slowly, walking about the room, though he could not remember anything that he thought of; switching out the lights as he went, and going into Brenda's boudoir, looking carefully around him as though to see that all was tidy, taking a book from the table (it was James Branch Cabell's *Figures of Earth*), and going quietly to bed, just as though this had been an ordinary night. He slept perfectly, and in the morning brought himself to open the pile of letters that had accumulated, notes of condolence, glancing at their signatures and throwing them aside unread. Among them one, however, arrested him—a letter from Marjorie Morrison, ten lines only, telling him she had read of the death in the paper and offering her sympathy.

He put it down, staring in front of him. He had not thought of her for weeks. The rooms in Darcy Street suddenly came back to him, vividly in detail, as they had been, the afternoon that Brenda had come to him a year ago. He saw the manuscripts lying on the floor, the volumes of Donne and Francis Thompson open on the arm and seat of his chair; saw Marjorie coming into the room, and instantaneously re-lived that evening and all of the next day: his morning call at the house, the strange parlour-maid whom now he knew so well as Anson; Waterloo Station, and Brighton, and his scratch supper. Memory poured like released water into an empty vessel. He began to think of Marjorie, of their many evenings together and their walks in the country; he saw the two of them lunching in village inns; recalled

woods and lanes and little churches and the last mile of the road at evening, the train journeys home, and his rooms again, with her sitting at his feet, leaning back against his knees. Suddenly, he missed her, wanted her again. She would relieve this loneliness; she would be someone to think of, someone to please and to care for. They had talked of his taking her to Germany; why should he not do so now? Where was she? He took up her letter again to look at the address; it came from her home in Wembley Park. Should he write to her, ask her to come and see him, suggest her dining with him? Would she come? He knew, certainly, that she would, otherwise she would never have written. He reached on the impulse for a sheet of paper, and then stopped.

Other scenes came back to his memory, scenes of deeper intimacy, memories of the intensity of her passion, which had seemed to grow with each encounter, disturbing him, since all that he had felt for her was tenderness and gratitude. He remembered the scene of their parting, and shuddered at the recollection. Oh, it was not fair; he must not see her again; he dared not re-awaken those fires. She had not forgotten him, but the year of absence must have done much. He must not write to her; he must not see her.

Yet the thought of her grew. He wondered what she was doing. He knew that she had left Oliphant's, making excuse that she was ill and wanted a holiday, but he wondered what she had done since then. Was she happy? Had she reconciled herself to the small suburban life that she hated? A desire to see her home, born suddenly of curiosity, became overmastering, and he went that afternoon by Metropolitan to Wembley Park, asking his way to the road in which she lived, a long road that wound uphill, with little, tidy houses, each with its rose trees, its cinder-path and its garage. He stood a moment outside "Loch Katrine," which was her home, looking at it; there were blue curtains to the windows of the front room, and inside he could see a small dining-table, and a sideboard with a bowl of fruit, and a mantelpiece with photographs. He walked on to the top of

the hill and then down again, passing the house once more, but it told him nothing. He did not know why he had come, but he found himself wondering why she hated it; life in this suburb, pleasantly bright and sunny this afternoon, with its long roads and its shopping street, with the dairy and the cake-shop and the little stationer's and circulating library, seemed pleasant and simple enough. What had all his love of beauty, his fastidiousness and delicacy of living, brought him? He must sell his own house and all his things, pictures, books and furniture; all the possessions he had gathered so carefully, that he had thought he loved, were useless, dead, unable to comfort him. Better to be alone with nothing, or to live like this, simply, with plain simple things, than to clutter himself with a collection, as he had done—a collection that seemed to menace him in its still, impersonal refusal to become a part of his life. He saw his own house now as a temple, a temple to his love for Brenda and his love for art, and knew that that had been its fault. There had been worship there and feasting, but never life, the life of human relationship; that life had escaped it. That life had gone on all around him, in every street and every house, but his it had not entered.

He tried to think of Marjorie in his house and could not. It had been made for Brenda; while she lived it had been still and somehow hushed, but graced with her divinity set in its shrine; now that she was dead it was a place deserted, never to be awakened into life.

He returned there, and then would not go in, stopping at the door and turning back, calling a taxi and going to his club, drinking there for an hour, until he thought of dinner when, from association, he went again to Umberto's, the first time he had entered it for a year now. While he ate he thought of Marjorie and of their dinners there together, and still he was tempted to recall her, but he knew that he must not. After dinner he walked, threading the streets of Soho, making his resolution. He must not see her. Each time that he said it his longing seemed to grow, his longing for some solace, and memories became more urgent, but he put

them from him. He must not see her. He would not see her. He would not write to her.

The days moved painfully. He did nothing but walk and drink, walking all over London and out to every suburb, exploring Ealing, Barnes, Dulwich, Islington and Stamford Hill. He walked all day, lunching at tea-shops in these remoter places, or at public-houses, taking 'buses when he grew tired; in the evenings he dined at Umberto's, and drank, and strolled the West End streets and lounged in bars, returning home at midnight. The weather remained fine and hot. He did this for a week and more, and then, one day, walking in Tottenham, the realisation came to him of what he was doing, filling in time, as it were in eternity, and that he could not go on. He was acting as though he were waiting for something, and there was nothing left to wait for.

He went abroad, to Paris, where he spent two weeks, meeting people he knew slightly and cared little about, eating with them, drinking with them, haunting the Ritz bar, sitting in the night-clubs of Montmartre drinking bad champagne, returning to his hotel long after dawn and sleeping until lunch-time.

From there he went on to the Lido, as he had written Elinor, attaching himself to the fastest and hardest drinking set that he could find; he lay on the beach for half the day in a bathing-suit, playing bridge in the late afternoon, drank and played poker half the night, and found himself involved in a callous, vicious intrigue with an American divorcée. From the Lido he went to Capri, and thence to Sicily.

For Elinor, too, after her last scene with Paul, London, became a vacuum. Like Richard she, too, had the sense of waiting, as one waits for a friend who has failed an appointment long after there is any use in waiting, lingering on merely because there is nothing else to do. But she, at least, had a life to resume; swiftly she drew herself together to face it, too swiftly, allowing no time for recuperation. She engaged a new secretary and attacked her book with a desperate vigour, reminded

against her will of the way in which she had written her second novel to stave off the horror of her life with Roly. She threw herself into a series of strenuous plans for enlarging the picture-gallery, gathered up stray ends of neglected acquaintance, and even began, at last, to contemplate moving out of her flat, in which she felt now that she had lived too long, as though in a lumber-room. She had money made from her play during the past year, and she could afford a better place, seeing at last a justice in the reiterated naggings of Nancy and Cynthia, seeing a more conventional, more ordered home now as desirable, yet feeling that to admit it was somehow like admitting to middle age. She interviewed house-agents and inspected flats, half-heartedly and without conviction, it is true, but the process occupied her mind, turning it away from the things that she wanted to forget.

Only once was she reminded of Paul, and that was when, about two weeks after she had parted from him, she received a note from Audrey asking to be allowed to come and see her. She answered the request in the affirmative, with a twisted smile in her mind at the recollection of her own similar note and Audrey's brief reply four months ago. The interview was very different, however, from the one in Wimbledon, and Audrey seemed to her not unlike a garment which she had previously seen when it had been starched in error, now restored to its natural state of softness. She came in all humility, wanting to beg Elinor's pardon and to ask her forgiveness, timidly and almost with tears trying to thank her for releasing Paul; and Elinor laughed and gave her tea, and led her away, as best she could, from the subject of the past. When she left, Audrey came towards her, and then kissed her suddenly and ran from the flat. She and Paul were obviously very happy in their re-union, and Elinor felt glad of it. That she herself was, from all material standpoints, well out of her entanglement with him, she knew; but the relief which she was aware that she ought to feel, which she supposed herself to be feeling somewhere below the surface of her conscious

emotions, was slight in comparison with the bitterness, the humiliation, the sense of the waste and the needlessness of it all which dominated her still when she allowed herself to think of him.

So, turning as it were to the last reserve store of energy and vitality that she possessed, she went about her life for the next two months. People began slowly to return to London, to re-assemble for the winter resumption of their activities. She had been thankful for the absence of so many of them, and saw them returning now with apprehension; each time that the telephone rang it seemed to her like some monstrous evil animal thrusting out a fresh-grown tentacle to drag her back into a whirlpool where she would be sucked down, helplessly. She saw London, and the social world in which she was used to have her being, as a kind of giant octopus from which she was powerless to escape, arm after arm being thrown out after her, winding her in. The horror of this fantasy appalled her, revealing to her the disordered state of her nerves, but she could not escape it.

Hermione returned in September to prepare for her departure to America, where Ham Sotherington was to accompany her; and shortly afterwards Norman Clifford re-appeared, attended, to everyone's immense surprise, by a wife, whom he had acquired in Belgium during the summer. Her name was Anny Van Weelands-Huysen, and she was a young Dutch woman of thirty-seven, whom Norman had met, while she was working in a bank in Antwerp, on the occasion of his visit there for the presentation of *Old Peterkin* at the Flemish opera. They had been married in Blankenberghe in August. Elinor met her at a dinner that Hermione gave for them, and found her a squat and solid person of great strength of character, flushed in the face and innocent of powder, with flaxen hair braided and rolled into cart-wheels over her ears. She spoke an ugly and determined English, and knew absolutely everything; she had never before been to London, but she beat Hermione in an argument over its geography; she had a supreme con-

tempt for English art of all kinds, of which she appeared to have made an exhaustive study, and insisted on lending Elinor a number of masterpieces by modern continental authors of whom she had never heard, bringing the books down, wrapped in brown paper, to her Mews one pouring wet afternoon. On arrival, she removed a pair of powerful galoshes, and put them, with an umbrella, in the grate, while she made a large tea and wrote out a list of further works, which she recommended Elinor to get from a library.

"When you have read these we will discuss them together," she said in a tone which suggested a threat rather than a promise. During the remainder of her visit she discussed Hermione, whom she said she did not consider sufficiently "serious"; she did not like the modernist decoration of her house. "We have a cinema in Amsterdam who is much better," she remarked. From *art nouveau* she turned the conversation to music, of which she declared there was none in England. "You must hear Mengelberg conduct Mahler to know what music is," she said. "I will send you the score of his Eighth Symphony," and when she took her departure, she shook hands with Elinor, and said:

"I am becoming your works from the library. When I have made a complete study of them I would like to come and discuss them with you."

Norman, however, seemed very pleased with her, and the importance that the surprise of his marriage was giving him.

Among the last to return was Nancy, and with her she brought Mrs. Anthony, whom she seemed to have appropriated. Elinor had heard from Evelyn during August that she and her mother were in Dinard, and, later, that she had been sent to stay, much against her will, with the Brussels family, while Mrs. Anthony had returned to Nice, where her third sister had been taken ill. From Nice Mrs. Anthony had gone to stay with Nancy, pressed by importunate invitation, and returned with her at the beginning of October, Evelyn meeting them in Paris.



"Elinor," Evelyn's voice came over the telephone one morning, excitedly, yet with more than a hint of trouble in it, "are you at home? Can I come down and see you? Now? I've got something to tell you. It's very important. I'm speaking from a call-box at Finchley Road. Can I come at once?"

"Yes, of course," Elinor answered. "Is anything wrong?"

"Yes, very wrong. Will you be alone? I want to talk to you privately."

The new secretary was in the room, working.

"I'll meet you up West," Elinor said, "outside the National Gallery, in three-quarters of an hour. Will that do?"

Evelyn was waiting impatiently when she got there.

"Where shall we go?" said Elinor. "Let's walk down to the Embankment Gardens."

They went down Villiers Street.

"Now, darling, what is it?" she asked.

"Well, it's just this," Evelyn said, indignantly. "Mother's been talking to me. I suppose I've got no right to pass it on, really, and Mother will be furious when I tell her, but I don't care, even if I did get it in maternal confidence. I'm not going to keep it to myself."

"But what? What did she say?"

"Just that she wanted me to try and see less of you in the future."

"Why?"

"That's what I asked."

"And what did she say?"

"Oh, just that she didn't really know that you were the sort of person she wanted me to see a lot of. That your way of life was naturally different from what mine would be, and that she didn't know that she awfully wanted me to get your ideas; that they might be all right for you, 'but'——. You know the sort of thing; beautifully vague, with a lot of 'awfullys' thrown in to tone it down still further; nothing to catch hold of. I went off the deep end, and said I supposed she meant that she

wanted me to stop knowing you altogether, and that if she thought you were a moral leper I wished she'd have the courage to say so straight out."

"And she said?"

"That if she couldn't talk to me without my losing my temper she was sorry she'd said anything at all. We had a grand scene after that, and she got hurt and said she wouldn't be spoken to like that, and I bounced out of the house and telephoned you. What does it all mean, Elinor?"

"How should I know."

"Well, I'll tell you what I think it is . . . or, rather, *who* I think it is . . . and that's that beastly Mrs. Rossiter. Elinor, she's a horrible woman; I don't know how you can like her. I bet she's been gossiping to Mother down at Cap Ferrat, saying the most filthy things about you, probably. I wouldn't trust her an inch. As a matter of fact, I asked Mother plump out if it was she, and she said it wasn't anybody, but that if I was going to take that tone she didn't propose to discuss it any further. I'm damn well not going to leave it there, though. I shall have it out with her, if I die in the attempt."

"I shouldn't, darling," Elinor began tentatively.

"Why not?" Evelyn stormed on. "What else can I do? I mean to get to the bottom of this. Why should I give up seeing you, just because Mother tells me to? Damn it all, I'm old enough to choose my own friends! I'm turned eighteen."

"Yes, I know," Elinor said gently, trying to quieten her. "I didn't mean that. I meant, let me see her."

"You?"

"Yes, let me talk to her. Let me find out what it's all about."

"She wouldn't tell you. She'd probably deny ever having said anything at all. You don't know Mother. She never faces up to things. Besides, she's jealous of you."

"How do you know?"

"I'm sure of it. Jealous of my friendship with you. of my being as fond of you as I am."

"Nonsense," said Elinor, sternly. "Don't talk like that. You know it's not true."

"I don't," said Evelyn, sulkily, but yielding a little.

"Well, you won't do anything silly? You'll let me talk to her?"

"I shall tell her I've told you. Damn it all," she burst out again, "what right has she got?"

"Every right," said Elinor, reasonably. "She's your mother. Supposing she does feel that I'm not the right influence for you, that my way of life and my friends are not the kind she'd choose for you . . ."

"Well, who's asking her to choose?" Evelyn interrupted. "I tell you I'm old enough to decide for myself. And, anyway, I don't care a damn about your friends. I've never met any of them, except Mrs. Rossiter, whom I hate, and A. C. K. Benford last year. By the way, you were quite right about his books; I couldn't read them. Mother met him on the Riviera, I believe. Perhaps it's he she doesn't like. Anyway, he's not such a very great friend of yours, is he? As for your 'way of life,' I don't know what she means, or you, either. Just because you're an author and don't live in a stuffy, respectable house in Hampstead, like we do . . ."

"It isn't that," Elinor said.

"Well, what is it, then? You don't run a gambling-hell or an opium-den, do you? Lovers? Is that what she meant? Is Mr. Benford your lover?" Elinor quailed for a moment. "Oh, but he can't be," Evelyn went on. "He's only just got married, hasn't he—Lady somebody something? Do you have lovers? Anyway, what do I care? Most of Mother's friends wouldn't have the guts . . . or the looks."

"Darling, stop talking a moment, will you?" Elinor said, with a smile in her voice, though there was none in her heart. "None of that's got anything to do with it. I'll see your mother, and find out what it's all about. I think you're exaggerating; I don't for one moment imagine she wants you to give up seeing me; I'll talk to her, but there is one thing you've got to realise."

"What's that?"

"Just that she's your mother, and that you're still very young." Evelyn turned away, contemptuously. "No, don't be angry. But the point is that she *has* got the right to . . . I won't say 'choose' . . . but to approve of your friends, within certain limits. And I am responsible for you . . . to her."

"I don't see it. Elinor, why are you taking this line? Are you trying to get rid of me?" she asked, suddenly. "Am I a bore? Is that it? I'm sorry if I've made a nuisance of myself."

"Don't be ridiculous," Elinor said. "You know it's not that."

"Well, what is it, then? Do you think you're contaminating me, or what?"

For an hour they walked the gardens, talking, arguing, and at last Evelyn said:

"Look here, I must get home or I shall be late for lunch, and then there'll be more trouble. Well, talk to Mother, but, as I say, I don't believe you'll get anything out of her. I don't understand what you mean about being responsible for me. I'm not a baby any more, and I've known you four years, and I give you fair warning that unless you positively sling me out, I intend to go on seeing just as much of you now as ever I did, no matter what Mother says. And that, Elinor darling, is that!"

Elinor went to lunch, a weak, frightened sensation within her. She had every intention of putting up a fight, for Evelyn's sake, for her own sake, since she loved the child, but she was uncertain of what she had to contend with. What was it that Mrs. Anthony had learned? Had Nancy talked, as Evelyn had suggested, or was she actuated, merely, by impressions that she had gathered for herself upon the Riviera? She did not know.

She saw Nancy that afternoon, having already promised to call on her. It was their first meeting since Nancy's return, and she found her with Winkie in her boudoir. Winkie prattled merrily over cocktails for a while, and presently took herself off. Nancy turned to Elinor.

"Nice to see you, darling," she said. "But you're not looking a bit well. Your holiday doesn't seem to have done you a scrap of good. And we all thought you were looking so splendid down at the Cap. You're not worried about anything, are you? Isn't Winkie a scream? You heard all about her and Lois Fane, didn't you?"

"No; what?"

"The scene they had? Oh, my dear, it was marvellous. All over Gus Benford, too. You know Sybil came home before he did; her father was ill, or something; and Gus went over to stay at Antibes because their lease of the villa was up. Well, Winkie went over there, too, because I had Mrs. Anthony staying, and Sam's sister was in Hermione's room. Well, I don't know whether there *was* anything between Gus and Lois, or between him and Winkie for the matter of that—Hermione and Ham used to have bets about it—but it seems Lois was awfully jealous of Winkie. They didn't hit it off a bit together, and then one night, at the Casino at Juan, at a party, Lois got tight and threw a glass of champagne in her face. Awful goings-on. Winkie's perfectly priceless about it; you must get her to tell you the story. She wired for Goronwy to come out. Rupert Lovelace said the telegram ran: 'Insulted. Start law-suit and come immediately. Winkie.' But they patched it up somehow, and Lois apologised, and now they're on kissing terms again. Isn't it a scream?"

"Was Mrs. Anthony there?" Elinor asked.

"Not at the party, dear. I wasn't, either. I wish I had been."

"But she heard about it?"

"My dear, the whole coast heard about it. Nobody talked of anything else for days. Gus certainly seems to be very attractive to women. Winkie had a theory that *you'd* had an affair with him. I think Mrs. Anthony found Winkie a little startling, by the way."

"Yes." Elinor rose, and then burst out, "Oh, God, you're a fool, Nancy!"

"What do you mean?" Nancy asked in astonishment.

"What did you have her there for? Why couldn't you have used some sense?"

"I don't understand. Darling, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." Elinor gave it up. What was the use? The harm was done.

She knew now why Mrs. Anthony had spoken as she had, and returned home feeling like one who sees a curse and a prediction coming true, frightened and helpless.

The last post brought her a letter from Hampstead:

"Dear Miss Johnson,—Evelyn has told me that she saw you this morning, and I gather she has given you a very highly coloured version of something that I had previously said to her. I am very sorry that she should have done this, all the more so as I fear she must sadly have misrepresented my meaning, and I am most anxious that there should be no misunderstanding between us. I should be very grateful, therefore, if you could spare the time to see me if I were to call on you one afternoon this week. I should greatly welcome an opportunity of explaining. Perhaps you will let me know. —With kind regards, sincerely yours,

Margaret Anthony."

Elinor telephoned in reply to this, and Mrs. Anthony came the following afternoon.

It was an awkward interview. Pretty and graceful, she appeared a little frightened and extremely concerned at the idea of what Evelyn might have said.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am that this should have occurred," she kept saying. "I had no idea that Evelyn would take what I said in the way she did, but I'm afraid she is very impulsive and rather quick-tempered, too. I don't know exactly what she told you, Miss Johnson, but I rather gathered that she must have given you the impression that I had asked her to discontinue her friendship with you. Please don't think that." Elinor made a faint acknowledgment, but said nothing.

"But you see," Mrs. Anthony went on, "Evelyn's position is going to be a little different now from what it has been in the past. She has left school, and naturally

she will have a great deal more time to herself. She has always been in the habit of seeing a good deal of you during her holidays, but now that she will be at home permanently I felt I should say something to her, so that . . . well, so that she should not get any false ideas of how large a part this friendship could play in her life. After all, you have your own affairs, your own friends. You've been very kind to Evelyn in the past, but you're a busy woman; you can't afford the time to be bothered with her, all day and every day. And I think that is rather what she expected. I wanted to warn her, to save her disappointment. That was all."

She was doing it well, Elinor thought, sparing her feelings admirably. Had she not had her interview with Nancy, she might almost have been deceived by this persuasiveness.

"That's very kind of you, Mrs. Anthony," she said. "But I don't think Evelyn would be a bother to me."

"She wouldn't mean to be," Mrs. Anthony replied, "but she's very young and she's apt to be a little thoughtless, and perhaps, even, inconsiderate. She wouldn't realise how much of your time she was taking up."

Elinor was inclined not to argue, to accept defeat with the weapons which were being offered her, to agree in the pretence that this was all the issue involved. She knew, too, that Mrs. Anthony would never come into the open, but, for Evelyn's sake, she made an effort.

"It's very thoughtful of you," she said, quietly, "but if I don't mind taking the risk of that . . . ? Are you sure there's nothing more? I don't think Evelyn can quite have misunderstood to that extent. I'd like you to be frank with me, Mrs. Anthony."

The lady looked embarrassed.

"I'm trying to be," she said, awkwardly, "but you must understand that it's a little difficult for me. I am so very anxious that you shouldn't misconstrue my meaning. I do beg you not to take anything I say as being meant personally . . . but Evelyn is something of a worry to me, Miss Johnson. She's a very impressionable

child, and eighteen is a difficult age. Oh, I blame myself a good deal for having left her as much as I have. Now that she has left school I hope to remedy that; she will be able to travel with me, and I myself will stay at home more. She hasn't many friends of her own age; I think that's a pity. I think she has ideas beyond her years. I'm not sure that perhaps being with you as much as she has has not encouraged that. I don't want you to think I'm not grateful for all you've done for her; I am, extremely so. But, Miss Johnson, Evelyn's life must necessarily be very different from what yours is, from the life that you and your friends lead. . . ."

"I've never introduced her to any of my friends, Mrs. Anthony."

"I know. But surely, now that she is going to be at home most of the time, that is going to be increasingly difficult for you? And I don't want her to get drawn into a set which . . ." she smiled nervously . . . "well, into a set where she might get ideas which would only make her unhappy in her own environment. The artistic set, or the smart set, for example. You *do* understand me, Miss Johnson?"

It was obviously torture for the poor lady to find words by which she might not say what was in her mind. Elinor felt acutely sorry for her, and abandoned the struggle.

"I do, Mrs. Anthony."

"I'm not asking you to give up seeing Evelyn, but I do think that for her sake it would be better if you could manage . . . somehow . . . very tactfully . . . to see a little less of her. I sincerely hope you'll forgive my speaking like this."

"Of course."

"Bringing up a young girl is a very great responsibility," she remarked; and soon after took her leave.

Elinor resigned herself to it, but this was not the end; Evelyn remained to be dealt with. She saw her a day or two later.

"Well, have you seen Mother?" the girl asked.

"Yes."



"I thought you had. Not that she told me. What did she have to say?"

Elinor made an attempt to reproduce Mrs. Anthony's evasiveness for her.

"How ridiculous!" was Evelyn's comment. "And that was all you got out of her? Well, that's all right, then. Now we can just go on as though nothing had happened. Tell me all about everything—the summer, and your new book, and what Corsica was like. Who did you go with? Oh, by the way, we're going to move at last. Mother's got rid of the house, and she's talking about a flat near Regent's Park."

The afternoon passed without difficulty, and Elinor succeeded in evading Evelyn's suggestions for their next meeting. Mrs. Anthony had right on her side; she herself was powerless to oppose her, and there was no alternative but to do as she had asked, as indeed she had resolved to do before going to America, and apply a brake to this friendship. It was not, however, a process that she enjoyed. She happened to be out on two occasions during the next few days when Evelyn telephoned her; the third time her secretary answered for her and said that she was not at home; Evelyn rang up again, and this time Elinor spoke to her, but evasively. There followed a series of letters, which began by being disappointed and faintly reproachful, and worked up to something like the letters of a lover importuning a neglectful mistress. Finally they ceased for a space of about four days, and then one morning Evelyn appeared suddenly at the Mews. Her face looked curiously dark and set.

"Elinor, I want to talk to you," she said. "I'm sorry if I'm disturbing your work, but the morning was the only time I could be sure of finding you in, and I must speak to you."

Elinor sent the secretary out on errands, and settled down, with misgiving, to Evelyn.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's rather unpleasant," Evelyn replied, "but I've got to tell you, because I've been hearing some perfectly

filthy stories about you, and if that's the kind of thing that's going around I thought you ought to know, so that you can do something about stopping it—bring a libel action or something."

"Well?"

"Well, I heard it from Jack. He got it from that Myra Molyneux woman, who told him about some beastly divorce case she said you were mixed up in." There was a silence. "Elinor, it's not true, is it?" she cried.

"You haven't told me what she said."

"You're not mixed up in any divorce case?"

"I was," Elinor said, simply.

"Elinor!" Evelyn's voice thinned suddenly almost to a breath, and her face seemed to extinguish itself completely, save for her eyes, which were large and burning. "A young boy? A boy called Fairless, whose wife's divorcing him for you? It's not true? Elinor, say it's not true!"

"It *was* true. It isn't any more."

"Then . . . then . . . Oh, Elinor!" Her voice broke on a little gasp of misery. "Was that what Mother meant when she said you'd be getting married?"

"Your mother said?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"About four days ago. I had a scene with her because I hadn't heard from you, because you weren't answering my letters. I asked her if she'd made you promise not to see me. I nagged at her, and I think she lost her temper. She told me you were going to be married, and that that was probably why you didn't want me. I said I didn't believe it, and asked her how she knew, and she said Mrs. Rossiter had told her."

"Nancy!" Elinor whispered, as a flood of realisation broke over her.

"Yes. I was frightfully hurt because you hadn't told me. That's why I haven't written these last days. And then last night Jack came out with this. I didn't believe him. I told him I was going to come and ask you. I

thought it was that filthy Molyneux woman's invention. Elinor, what does it mean? You say it *was* true. *Are* you going to marry him? "

"No."

"But was the divorce part true? When you were in America, Jack said it was."

"How did Myra Molyneux know? "

"She knows . . . him, the boy. Oh, Elinor, Jack was so beastly about it. All gloating and awful, because he thought he'd smashed something for me, something I was proud of and that he'd always laughed at. He's always said that all women have affairs, and told me that I didn't know anything about life, and I've always said he had a filthy mind. I told him I'd make him take this back. And now you say it's true. Oh, God! Elinor, why? Why did you? How could you? And I suppose that was why Mother didn't want me to go on seeing you . . . because she knew. Oh, Elinor, why didn't you tell me? Why did you leave me to find out like this? "

She began to cry.

"Darling, I'm sorry," Elinor laid her hand on Evelyn's wrist, but the girl pulled away.

"No!" She sat suddenly erect, her mouth going into a hard, straight line. "You didn't trust me. You lied to me." The tears, which she had swallowed, came into her voice again. "You were the one person I believed in. You always have been. You knew that, but you couldn't trust me. That morning on the Embankment . . . do you think I wouldn't have understood, if *you'd* told me? But you didn't." Once more she mastered her tears. "You said you didn't know what it was all about, but you tried to take Mother's side, to put me off without my knowing. You didn't want me to know. Were you *so* ashamed of it? "

"Of course not," Elinor said, a shade sharply, and was about to continue, when Evelyn broke in again.

"I should think you might have been!" There was a new note in her voice that Elinor had never heard before, a cruel, wounding note that was striking venomously at her, and, through her, at something in Evelyn's

self, as though she wanted to trample on something that she loved, relishing the pain of its destruction, and her eyes were hard and bright and darkly hurtful. "Or is Jack right? Is it just the usual thing, and am I being stupid and old-fashioned to mind?" There was a tragic little attempted snarl in this. "I thought you were different. I see I was wrong. And I told you I thought it was beastly about Jack and Myra Molyneux"—her upper lip curled tremblingly in an effort to force a cynical little smile, mocking at herself—"and all the time you were doing the same yourself. I'm sorry. I'm afraid I've been an awful fool."

"You're being one now. Evelyn, listen to me. This divorce story's true. If you want me to, I'll try and tell you about it. I didn't, before, because it all ended in smoke, and I saw no reason why you should know; I didn't think it had got around. But I'm not ashamed of it. I'm desperately sorry, if you like, but that's different. It wasn't a question of not trusting you."

"Why did you do it?" Evelyn's voice was hard and chipped. She was staring ahead of her, not looking at Elinor.

"What? Keep it from you?"

"No. The other thing."

It was a hard question to answer.

"I was sorry for him, and I was fond of him, and he lied to me."

"But it was romance?" Evelyn's voice went up in a high, sharp sneer. "Was that what you meant when you talked about Jack and Myra? What people go to the cinema for? That's what you said, wasn't it? And you found it in him? In a young boy, young enough to be your son? Making him make love to you? Is that what you mean by romance? I'm afraid it's not my idea of it." She got up suddenly. "I think I'll go now. I'm sorry to have been such an idiot, but I expect you got a good laugh out of it."

She took her bag and her gloves from beside Elinor and went to the door, very proud and straight, obviously concentrating all her forces on being able to escape from

the room without breaking down. But at the threshold she turned and looked back, and then her face crumpled almost like paper, and the tears came through again, suddenly, blindingly now.

"Darling," Elinor began, and moved towards her. But Evelyn threw up her head, snatching open the door, slammed it behind her and rushed clattering down the stairs.

Elinor heard her go, and the bang of the door beneath. She stood still a moment and then returned, draggingly, to the sofa and sat again weakly, sickly, with a sense of having been stabbed somewhere in the region of her heart, the blood draining away from her. She could not move. She could only sit lifelessly, fascinated and appalled.

Presently the telephone rang. It was Winkie, wanting her to come to cocktails that afternoon. Elinor seemed only to hear her vaguely, as though through sleep.

"I don't think I can, Winkie," she said.

"Of course you can, darling. Don't be so silly. Lovely little cocktails, all made by hand. Nancy's coming, and Hermione and Ham and Sybil and Gus and Cynthia and Rupert Lovelace and everyone you love best. Bring anybody you like with you, and all be girls together!"

## XIX

SHE went to Winkie's, after all. She had not intended doing so, but anything, she felt, was better than sitting alone with the dazed fear and confusion of her thoughts.

The secretary had returned as she finished telephoning, and she had attempted to resume her work. For an hour she had dictated, thinking and talking above a weak, terrified sensation, which seemed to be somewhere in her body rather than in her mind. When one o'clock came, she sat watching Mrs. Moggridge lay the table for lunch, and tried to concentrate her thoughts on what it was that frightened her, to drag out the thing that lay, if it existed at all, somewhere in the back of her consciousness, that her brain refused to deal with. Fixed in her mind was a memory of Evelyn's face, wiped suddenly blank of all expression as it had been, as though a light somewhere within her had been extinguished, leaving only the dark grey eyes, wide and appalled, staring at her in a numbed accusation and appreciation, changing again to cruelty, as her voice rose, stridently high, above the tears in it. Yet, dwell on it as she might, she could not discover there the source of this strange constriction which seemed to be now around her heart, now her throat; it went beyond the pictorial details of her memory, seeming to arise from something within herself. The vision of Evelyn was bad enough, but she was aware, now, that she was missing its full poignancy, that there was something else, more elusive, that was gripping her, which her mind shied at naming. It came between her and her food, so that she pushed her plate from her after a show of eating merely; again, as she sat with her coffee, she tried to realise it.

She turned her mind to Nancy and her treachery,

as it might perhaps be called, in talking to Mrs. Anthony of Paul and the divorce, but she could not rouse herself to anger; the thing had gone beyond that. She thought of Myra Molyneux talking to Jack, telling him the story, and of Jack handing it on to Evelyn, gloatingly, as she had described; she sent her memory back over the summer, evoking pictures of herself and Paul in Corsica, and, further still, back to his flat where he had asked her to marry him, and to New York and her apartment, and the dawn that they had seen together. But they were only pictures that seemed to float over the surface of her mind, transparent almost, like magic-lantern slides; the other thing, nameless, colourless, intangible, remained unsummoned.

All the afternoon as she worked it lay, just out of reach, festering somewhere below the level of her consciousness. She dismissed the secretary early, and sat for a while reading through the pages she had dictated during the day, trying to apply her mind to them, but they meant nothing to her. She could only walk up and down in the weak grasp of this dim, paralysing dread, trying to realise the significance of all that had happened, but without success. Finally, she went to Winkie's.

When she entered the drawing-room the first thing that she saw was Nancy and Winkie, lying in the centre of the floor, trying to stand on their heads and perform slow somersaults, showing off their agility and their recent loss of weight. Winkie scrambled to her feet when she came in, rushed at her and placed both Elinor's hands firmly on her own hips.

"Feel!" she cried. "Aren't I a lovely slim girl? Little Winkie's got no tummy left at all. Put your hand on it. No horrid rolls of fat, nor nothing. Nancy's ever so jealous. She's had six Turkish baths in a fortnight to try and catch up with me."

"How did you do it?" Elinor asked mechanically.

"Diet, darling. No cocktails, no bread, no breakfast, no nothing. Specially no liquor. Poor little Winkie hasn't had a drink come Lammastide. All those lovely little cocktails standing there on the piano, and I'se being a

strong-minded girl and having nothing but lovely, lovely lemon-juice. It was seeing Norman's little Dutch girl, Miss Hook of Holland, that made me start it, really. I was teddified I might look like that myself one day, and then who'd take notice of little Winkie? You see, I'se not clever like she is."

Elinor turned to the rest of the room. Lady Sybil was present, talking to Cynthia and Hermione. Ham Sotherington was lounging against the mantelpiece.

"How do you keep so thin, Ham?" Nancy asked him. "What do you do for your figure? Oh, I do envy people like you and Hermione, who can drink a pint of milk a day and lose your pound a week regular!"

Elinor stared at Nancy, and felt as though she were somehow not seeing her. Her eyes took in the room and its inhabitants, but her brain refused to receive them. She had a sense of being imprisoned, as in a crystal. At the back of her mind she found that she was framing a speech, a speech of denunciation, levelled at Nancy, at them all, and felt it mounting in her head all the time that she was talking, without thinking, to the man beside her; she did not know what she was saying; she could only hear this other thing working in her brain, shouted in her own voice, terrified lest it should break from her lips and she should cry aloud in rage against them and the room and all that they stood for. Yet she knew that she would not do so; it was like the desire to throw oneself from the roof of a very high building, a desire that makes one shrink backwards from the edge, groping behind one for support, but a desire which is yet accompanied by a sense that the will and the volition, the conscious effort of the brain which stimulates the motor-nerves to action, is lacking to co-ordinate. She knew it was a fancy only that she would speak aloud; a stronger sense was guiding her in the routine of social conduct, moving her like a puppet among them, who seemed like silly ghosts. And in answer to that crying declamation in her head, another speech was framing, so that it seemed almost as though a debate were being waged—a speech that accused herself, that might be



their answer, telling her that she had brought this thing, whatever it was, this thing that was encompassing her, upon herself, that she had only herself to blame.

She was leaning against the piano, talking and listening to a man with a mild, stammering, ingratiating voice, who was discussing the latest plays in Paris, whence he had just returned. She had met him somewhere before, but she could not remember where. The room was dimly lit; the curtains across the windows were heavy and dully gold; there was a smell of incense from a pastille burning in a Chinese saucer on the mantelpiece; the carpet was thick and soft; and Elinor had suddenly a new sense, the sense of being drugged, of sinking slowly into a warm, thick, lulling haze of gold curtains and red firelight and the vague indistinct blue of smoke from cigarettes, a haze pierced by the cries of Winkie and Nancy above the meek gentleness of the voice to which she was listening.

Presently, Rupert Lovelace, the actor, appeared. He had a part in *Little Miss Millionaire*, and had come straight from rehearsal, full of stories about Lois Fane and the particular fit of temperament she had been throwing that afternoon. He regaled the room with them. Everyone stopped talking to listen to him, and shrieked with laughter at his imitation American accent. The first night, it appeared, had been postponed because Lois had refused to act with the leading man, and another had had to be engaged.

"It's put off till Tuesday week," he said.

"That's the night before you sail, Hermione, isn't it?" Nancy asked. "Let's have a farewell party afterwards at Lowndes Street. We're all going to the play, anyway. I suppose they'll change our tickets? I invite everybody. You're going, of course, Elinor? Dine with us first; just Ham and Hermione and you and Sam and me. Or were you going with somebody? Bring them along."

Hermione came over to talk to her, and led her into a corner.

"Darling," she said, "tell me something. I've been meaning to ask you for ages. What's happened?"

"What about?" Elinor asked, vaguely.

"You. The Fairless boy. I haven't seen you with him lately."

"It's over," Elinor told her briefly. "He's gone back to his wife."

"Oh, my dear, I am glad! What a stroke of luck for you! Or did you persuade her? How thankful you must be, anyway."

Elinor smiled in reply. Again a speech began in her head, denouncing Hermione for having told Ham and, presumably, Nancy of the affair, but this time it was more remote; she had less sense of the danger of utterance. It was only something which she felt might perhaps be said, yet would not be worth saying, as an anecdote may occur to one and not seem worth the trouble of telling. If Hermione had not told Nancy, then Nancy would not have told Mrs. Anthony. But that did not dispose of Jack and Myra Molyneux. The threads were too many, she could not follow them; there was no one person she could blame, unless it were herself. But she was not seeking to apportion blame; it had got beyond that; it was not that which was worrying her. What was it? She did not know.

Hermione was talking again, telling her she had let her house to Eileen Barringer. "Good God!" Elinor thought, "will this inter-patterning never cease?" Gus had appeared from somewhere in the crowd, which was thickening in the room, and was standing beside them, smiling at her.

"You've been lying very low, lately," he said. "I haven't seen you anywhere."

"I've been working," she replied. Hermione had moved away. "What are we doing in the same circles, anyway?" she asked.

"It is curious, isn't it?" he smiled back. "But Sybil's very friendly, and people seem to like our society."

"And now that you're *rangé*, it doesn't matter?" She did not know why she said that. Oh, God, why had

he still the power to make her say these things, bitter and hurtful, he alone of everyone in the world? She saw him smile at the thrust, as though he knew she would feel that she had cheapened herself in delivering it, amused at the knowledge that he could still disturb her, and at once she felt that she must go away, get out of this. She was afraid suddenly of bursting into tears.

"Your Nancy Rossiter's a little hard to bear with, though," he was saying. "And she'd have been quite all right if they'd left her in the suburbs, too, poor woman, where everyone would have thought how nice she was. It's tragic to watch anyone so unconsciously going around making everyone feel uncomfortable. Even Sybil's getting fed-up with her, and *she's* an angel; but then her snubs are like other people's kisses, and, anyway, you can't snub Nancy, if she doesn't want you to. Hermione's like that, too, when she's set her mind on anything. She's like the German who was kicked downstairs and looked up from the bottom, saying, 'A little more and you will insult me.'"

"I must go," Elinor said, abruptly.

He misunderstood her motive.

"Dear Elinor," he mocked. "Always so loyal! You might say a word to Sybil on your way out."

But Winkie was doing the splits in the middle of the room, and Elinor edged to the door, unnoticed.

It was raining heavily when she got into the street, and she walked a long way before she found a taxi. It was half-past seven when she reached home. She changed her wet things and got into pyjamas and a dressing-gown, feeling too tired to bother to cook herself a meal or to dress and go out again; instead, she brought the inevitable plate of cold sausages with her into the sitting-room and poured herself out a whisky-and-soda, which she took with her to the divan before the fire, and lay there with a book, trying to read.

But the moment that she was alone there descended on her again the sense that had been with her all the day; she could scarcely call it terror, since there was

nothing that she feared, nothing, at least, that she could name; she identified it rather as a vague, brooding, empty horror that was half mental, half physical, that felt as though a bird had become entrapped within her breast, beating its wings flutteringly, timidly panic-stricken, somewhere against her heart. "Nerves," she told herself; but the diagnosis helped little.

She surveyed the party in her mind. The sight of Gus, the first words she had had alone with him since their break in Devonshire over a year ago, seemed to have intensified her feeling. Her mind went back to her affair with him, and to her play, remembering her light, forgetful gladness the night of her dress-rehearsal and their visit to the Palladium, and it seemed as though she were recalling some debauch in which she had made a public fool of herself; she shrank from the self-portrait that she saw. She had given too much of herself to Gus, too much and too little; and from the thought of him she turned to Paul and her memories there, and found them, too, unendurable, because they involved her heart, wishing the emotion still with her. Anything was better than this emptiness.

Emptiness. Yes, that was it. It was not a hurt that she was feeling, but a blankness and a desolation. When Paul had left her to return to Audrey she had known it, the void that his going had created; but she had refused to face it, continuing with her life, regardless of the fact that it was like packing away provisions in a vessel that had no longer any base. To-day had shown her, her subconscious mind, at least, that the foundation of her life had crumbled; not now, but then, or so it seemed; that for the last two months she had been going on merely marking time, and in a vacuum, a vacuum in eternity. "What am I waiting for?" she asked herself. "What am I doing, anyway? Where am I going?"

She tried to perceive a purpose in her life, to visualise an aim or an end to it. What *was* the point of it all? Suddenly it eluded her. Not her work; she had no ultimate belief in that; it was a job that she enjoyed, but no more than a job, like any other job, that enabled her

to go on living . . . for what? It seemed a vicious circle. Was this what all the others had meant when they had accused her of wasting her life? But what were they doing with theirs? Trying, with all their ambitions and their strivings, to make some splash, some tiny ripple in an infinite water that stretched . . . where? What was their ultimate significance? None; she knew it, and they knew it, which was why they were so restless, so unhappy, so anxious to press on and never to reflect. If one stopped to reflect, the game was up. That couldn't be true. Was there no one who, if he stopped to think, could say why he was living, could explain his purpose, give some reason for his going on, beyond just the mere fact of going on? Surely it was not enough to live merely that one should not die, to mark time against Death, to move merely for the sake of moving, to live . . . in order to go on living? She found herself suddenly face to face with limitlessness, trying to visualise eternity, to push back to the ultimate, as one who seeks to make his mind a blank, asking himself: "What is it that I am thinking of?", answering: "I am thinking only: 'What am I thinking?' I am thinking of not thinking, and that is not 'not thinking.'" No, that led to madness. Was she going mad? She became suddenly afraid of that, too, wrenching her thoughts away, growing feverishly restless.

What was she living for? What had she ever lived for? It could not be merely Paul's defection that had brought her to this; he had been a purpose in her life, it was true, but for a short while only. What had there been before that? Her mind pushed back to Gus again, and to her play, her brief incursion into self-importance, and beyond that . . . what lay beyond that? Eighteen months ago . . . what had been her purpose then, what had been her life? She did not know; she could not remember; perhaps she had not thought, then. There had been other men, and she had been younger, too, with a sense of promise in the future which, for this evening at least, this evening of horror, had deserted her. And before them came Larry, and her marriage with Roly, and her

father, and, beyond that, childhood, which suddenly she could not bear to think about.

Evelyn; she turned her thoughts to Evelyn, but there again they baulked. Something had happened that she had always dreaded happening, yet now that it had come to pass, it meant less to her than she had feared. She could not quite grasp it. Was it her own fault? Why? For lying to the girl, for having accepted her devotion, as it were, on false pretences? For the conduct of her life? She had thought so surely that her life, that what she did with it, was her own affair; but now it had involved another, had hurt another; it had come to involve Evelyn's happiness. If she had still had Paul, it would not have seemed so tragic; Evelyn's loss would have been his gain. But it was for nothing, the child's illusion broken—and for nothing; there was nothing left to show for it. But that was not her own fault; it was Paul's, for his initial deception. No, it went farther back than that; she could not find the roots. In any case, she had broken the child's heart. She, or Paul, or Hermione, or Nancy, or Myra Molyneux, or Jack; they were all threads in a pattern that spelled her own destruction. The world seemed patterned, suddenly, only for that. Oh, but that was ridiculous, the fancy of a brain that has lost all sense of proportion, that in the conceit of misery sees destiny taking a sole personal malignant interest in itself, the universe massing its forces against one pitiable human being. It was laughable. She tried another line. Was this her punishment, this destruction that was being wrought about her, bringing desolation in her own heart, the punishment for some offence? But for what? Even the Puritan in her, always lying in wait to rack her conscience, refused to envision this as the punishment for sin. She was not aware of sin. Her adultery with Paul; bitterly she wished it undone, but she could not see it as sin. Her words to him returned to her mind: "I loathe adultery! Not for itself, but for all the other things that it brings crashing down with it, all the lies and misery and heartbreak. Between the parties it's their own affair, but how often does it stop

there? And why? Because people can't hold their tongues!" Oh, God, the mess of it all, the waste, the complicated emptiness of it!

At last she went to bed, resolved to take a double dose of sleeping-draught; she could not lie all night in this confusion. But as she turned back the sheets, she thought that they felt damp to her touch, and a drop of water fell coldly on to her head. She looked up at the ceiling, where she saw a large dark spreading patch. The rain was coming in. She laid her hand against the wall beside her bed and it, too, felt moist and clammy. There were marks on the paper. Again she was flooded by fear, she did not know of what. She could not sleep in this damp room. She got blankets, sheets, and pillows from the cupboard and made herself a bed on the divan in the sitting-room, and lay there inwardly trembling. The damp in her room seemed suddenly a symbol, oozing through the walls and the ceiling, of the thing that was spreading over her life. She could define her terror no more clearly than that, but the thought of those clammy stains on the wall beside her bed was sinister, as though there were a malignant presence there that seemed also to be working on the fabric of her life, rotting it. It had been a slow process; gradually it must have been making its way, until the rain this evening showed it in its first outward signs; so, too, she felt the thing in her life, working secretly, like a kind of mildew or corruption, creeping its way like the damp, until her interview with Evelyn to-day had shown her the stains, the signs of what had been going on.

She told herself that it was fantastic so to be dominated by a physical fact which betokened a need of workmen and repairs and nothing more, but the fancy gripped her mind and would not leave it. She felt hag-ridden as she lay awake listening to sounds which she never before had noticed: the drip of rain from gutters, the creaking of boards, and the slow trickling, intermittent splash from a tap or a pipe somewhere. She wandered round the flat trying to find it.

At last, about four, she fell asleep, but when she awoke in the morning she was not delivered of her fear. It was still lurking somewhere, lying in wait for her. She lay, trying to realise it. She had a sense of terror, as though something that she dreaded were to happen to her that day, but she could not think what it was; its namelessness added to its power. She rose and went again into her bedroom. The damp was still there. Again the fantasy awoke in her mind, suggesting some analogy between this creeping thing and some unknown menace in her life. She thought of it first as scandal, the power of slanderous tongues: Hermione and Ham and Nancy and Myra Molyneux; and then turned from that, inwards, to try and seek it in herself. The attempt was a failure, but it did not lessen her sense of some force which she had always thought to be a factor merely of life, which she could control and shape to her own uses, now suddenly achieving a life of its own, grown animate, exercising mastery over her, instead of she over it. She thought of the Robots, of the machines that came to life, and then, with the vision of the dark discolorations on the walls, her imagination turned to viler things, to the life that grows from corruption, the rotting of the human body dead or, worse, from disease when yet alive. It seemed almost as though she herself were suffering from some disease which was showing its ravages in her life, her flat, in everything around her. Mrs. Moggridge found her sitting at the table, her face in her hands, shaking all over with nervous fear.

As she worked during the morning she began to regain control of herself; she insisted on the secretary lunching with her, so that she might not be alone. An inspector called from a firm of decorators, scrambled about on the roof, with Mrs. Moggridge holding a ladder for him, planted in the Mews outside; he suggested remedies, and promised to send workmen first thing in the morning."

In the afternoon Nancy telephoned to make some further arrangements for the first night of *Little Miss Millionaire*.



"I thought we might dine at Vagliano's. It'll be more fun. It's almost next door to the theatre, and then the servants can get everything ready here for the party afterwards. I've asked Gus and Sybil to join us. Who are you bringing?"

Suddenly Elinor found she could not face it. She must escape from all this; it was killing her; it was that which was eating away her life, all these people, their parties, their gossip, their intrigues. Was it? She did not know, but she knew that she could not face them now, that they were dragging her down, entwining her. She remembered her earlier fancy of this social world being like an octopus, hauling her in; she felt now as though she were reaching for an axe to hack away its arms.

"I'm not coming," she said; and then added lamely: "I can't."

"Can't? But, darling, it was all arranged. We arranged it last night. Don't you remember?"

What was the answer?

"Yes, I know. But I'm going away."

"Away? Where? You never said anything about it."

"I know." It was being dragged out of her. "I only decided this morning."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know yet. I haven't thought. To the seaside, probably."

"At this time of year? Are you mad? Why? Why are you going?"

"I'm having things done to the flat. I want to be out of it."

"Is that all? Well, come and stay here."

"I'd rather go away."

"But, darling, why? And what an extraordinary time to have the place done up, anyway! Elinor, you can't go to the seaside. It's silly. Just when everything's happening in London, too. Why don't you come and stay here?"

"I want to work."

"Well, you can work here. Nobody would disturb

you. You don't want to miss the first night, and Hermione's farewell party and everything."

"I do!" Elinor found herself crying it, in spite of herself, and then she broke into tears. "Leave me out of it, Nancy. I'm going away. I can't stop now. Good-bye."

She put down the receiver, and saw that the secretary was trying not to look at her, busying herself rather too obviously with her machine. Elinor stood dabbing at her eyes, frightened anew at the way in which she had lost control of herself. Then she mastered her voice.

"I want to go away for a week or two," she said, "while the workmen are in the place. Down to the seaside somewhere. Will you come with me?"

Presently the telephone rang again, and the secretary answered it. It was Nancy once more, wanting to know if anything was the matter, if there were anything she could do. Elinor told the girl to say that she was all right, but that she could not speak to her just then.

Her decision to go away had been born of the moment only, as a means of escape; she had made it, without reflection, to evade Nancy and the party and the play and everything that those betokened, but when she considered it, she still approved it. She was, she realised, heading straight for a nervous breakdown; the accumulated strain of the past year and a half, all that she had suffered over Gus and Paul, all the prolonged living on excitement of her play and her lecture tour, were telling on her now. Physically, she felt ill, too. During the day a cold had started, attacking her throat and chest, due perhaps to her walk from Winkie's in the rain last night, and she knew from experience that, unless she checked it, it would last all winter, draining her vitality. And in her present state of mind she needed all her powers of physical resistance.

She left London two days later. Nancy came to see her before she went, disquieted by their telephone conversation, bringing her flowers. She repeated how foolish she thought it to go away now, just when there was so much happening in London. Elinor hung on to herself;

feeling near an outburst, praying that she might be able to restrain it.

"You always seem to do everything just at the wrong time," Nancy said, at last, exasperated.

"Do I?" Rage was mounting in her, but as it reached the surface it changed suddenly, humiliatingly, to tears.

"Darling, what's the matter? You're ill! What are you crying for?"

Elinor turned away from her.

"Nancy, please go," she said. "Leave me alone."

But Nancy came towards her, trying to put her arm round her.

"Darling, what is it?" she asked. "Tell me."

Elinor pushed her aside almost violently.

"Leave me alone!" she cried.

Nancy made her voice sympathetic.

"I know," she said. "You needn't tell me. I know. It's this divorce business, isn't it? But that's all over now. You're out of it—well out of it. I didn't tell you I knew . . ."

"No!" Elinor turned on her savagely. "You told everyone else, though."

"Elinor, what do you mean?" Nancy asked, aghast.

"Didn't you? What about Mrs. Anthony? 'Poor dear Elinor, it's such a shame she should have got herself entangled like this.' Was that it? Do you think I don't know how you've always talked behind my back? 'Of course I'm devoted to her!' Devoted! Your devotion! Ha! God, it's funny!" She began to laugh, but hysterically.

"Elinor, you're overwrought. You don't know what you're saying!" Nancy tried to reason with her, but her eyes were frightened.

"No!" With an effort Elinor pulled herself together.

"Nancy, please go away. I don't want to have a row. I'm not in a fit state. But I shall, if you don't go. Please!"

"I don't like to leave you like this," Nancy hesitated.

"You'd better."

There was a difficult silence. Nancy began to collect her things from the desk.

"Perhaps you're right to go away," she said, awkwardly. "You're obviously nervy." Elinor did not answer. Nancy stood uncomfortably wondering whether she should try and kiss her. She felt it unwise.

"Well, I'll say good-bye," she stammered.

"Good-bye." Elinor had her back to her.

"Let me know when you come back. If you'd like me to come down and see you . . ." Her voice dwindled at the lack of response, but still she fidgeted, unable to make an exit. She opened her bag and inspected herself in the mirror, touching her face. She looked across at Elinor, and then snapped the clasp of the bag together. "Well, good-bye," she said feebly, and went.

Elinor chose Margate for her retreat, chiefly on account of its air and the good that it might do her chest. It was the last week of October, and the town was already deserted. The hotel in which she stayed was large and ugly; empty save for one or two vague couples, who lingered around the lounges or the dining-room with an air of having forgotten to leave, and of staying on only out of inertia or absent-mindedness. The whole hotel was dominated by a curious apathy, which seemed particularly to affect the staff and the cooking, an apathy from which it awoke temporarily each week-end, relapsing again at lunch-time on Monday.

For the first two days the weather was fine, and Elinor felt relief at her escape. She liked walking the long, level, asphalt track to Kingsgate, populated only intermittently by nursemaids with babies or occasional young men giving the dog a run; she took pleasure in the big white chunkiness of the chalk cliffs, the cropped turf, the clean smell of the sea and the good, windy emptiness of it all. She liked the Victorian dumpiness of the Margate streets and squares, their blaring, crowded summer tawdriness gone from them now, leaving them with a curious unaffected simplicity in their ugliness, which a sense of permanence and sincerity had touched to an almost charming naïveté, not unlike an old aunt whose eccentricity of plainness in dress can become endearing rather than ridiculous when

matched against the jolly honesty of face beneath the hideous, demoded hat. She liked, too, the suburban pleasantness of Cliftonville, with its shopping street full of bicyclists doing their errands, its pastry-cooks and stationers, and the rows of neat red lodging-houses and private hotels, simple and empty now, everything with the air of having been carefully, tidily folded and laid away on shelves in storage for the winter. There was simple permanence in it all, and that, she realised, was what she longed for: simplicity, order and security, a neatness and an endurance in her life. She had a glimpse of it here. She imagined that everyone must be happy, living like this.

But after two days the weather broke, turning to rain and wind which swept the streets to dingy bareness, and made the walk across the cliffs impossible against the strength of the gale. She essayed it and, as a result, contracted another cold, which forced her to remain in bed, feverish and coughing, with a burning pain in her breastbone. When she rose again, she felt weak and ill and miserable. The new secretary got on her nerves; she was a refined young woman, who read film magazines and erotic novels in which the action passed in foreign countries, preferably in Egypt; she thought Margate vulgar, and she had a number of theories about etiquette, never tiring of relating stories, in illustration thereof, concerning people at her home, explaining how they were or were not ladies and gentlemen, according to some obscure standards of social decorum to which they had either succeeded or failed in conforming. She had obtrusively genteel table-manners, and was always "having her feelings hurt" by Elinor's unconscious violation of some private code of her own as to how she should be treated, retiring into a martyred, chilly politeness for hours on end. There were moments when she reminded Elinor of a refined version of Eliza Doolittle, protesting: "I got my feelings same as anyone else."

After two weeks of it, Elinor's nerves were again near breaking-point. Her escape had been useless. When she thought of London it frightened her; she felt that

she could not return to all its intricacies of intrigue; she contemplated going abroad, but that seemed only a temporary refuge. She could not spend the rest of her life in exile or in flight. She could not imagine how she was going to spend it. She could visualise no future that was not miserable and lonely. Nancy, Hermione, Winkie, she had no desire to see any of them again. What should she do? She considered, even, buying a little house in some seaside town such as this, and settling there, but she knew that that would not do. She wanted peace and permanence above all things, but not alone. She was not a solitary person; she needed companionship, at any rate the companionship of one other human being with whom to share her life; some intimate, some familiar. The realisation startled her, she who had always believed herself to be self-sufficing, whose code it had been that she should always stand alone, asking nothing of anyone; she saw her present need as a weakness to which she had been dragged down, but she could not go on alone. Perhaps it was not that she was asking for someone on whom to lean; she told herself that what she wanted more was someone who needed her. She hoped that it was true. Someone she needed, or someone who needed her—one or the other, she did not know which, but not to go on alone; that, at least, she knew she could not endure. But there was no one; she knew of no one. "Shall I come to a cat and a parrot at last?" she asked herself, half laughingly, though the prospect frightened her. "What am I going to do? What am I going to do with my life? I can't just go on writing novels for ever. Another twenty, thirty years; another twenty, thirty novels." The vision was horrible. She felt beaten and bruised and humiliated, and desperately lonely.

And then she received a letter from Norman's wife, Anny, saying that she had had influenza, and proposed joining her at Margate to recuperate, having been told of the so excellent beneficencies of its atmosphere. The letter was not, however, written to know if she might come; it was the announcement of an intention. She

arrived, bringing with her an immensely long Dutch novel which she was in the process of translating.

"So we shall both be working," she said. "We will respect the other's hours, and we can take our exercise while your secretary is typewriting on my manuscript. You will perhaps correct it for me, if there should be any small questions of idiom with which I am not yet perhaps well acquainted. But I want that it should be kept classical. It is what you call a masterpiece, beside whom your Arnold Bennett will be childlike. You will see."

After two days of Anny the secretary gave notice, and two days later Elinor returned to London, making a pretext of having to supervise the workmen at her flat. Before she left, however, she gathered one piece of interesting information from Anny. Norman was engaged on composing some incidental music for a play; Anny had forgotten the author's name, but from her description of the plot, Elinor recognised it as the one which Paul had written in Corsica. On her way up in the train she read in the theatrical columns of the *Daily Telegraph* (a paper which she bought each Thursday, since her own experience of the theatre) the announcement of its imminent production in the West End by the London manager to whom Paul had submitted it in the summer. Rehearsals were stated already to have begun.

She returned to her flat with misgiving. The workmen had done their job; the bedroom was re-papered, and appeared to be dry again, but she entered it almost as though it were haunted, an impression which grew on her as she lay fearfully wakeful in the night, persisting through the following days. She hated the place now, seeing it as a symbol of all the impermanence and confusion from which she longed to escape. She went again to the house-agents, and began feverishly to look for somewhere else to live, inspecting flats, solid and conventional, and dull, respectable maisonettes, pushing out, even, into the remoter suburbs in her desire to break away from her past mode of existence, seeking only some external symptom of stability, at which, drowningly,

she could grasp. Finally, she committed herself to a flat in Hampstead, bright and ordinary, in a block which stood at a corner, its windows looking down long, straight roads of tall, red-brick houses, lace-curtained and identical; the block had a garden and cinder tennis-courts, shared communally with other flats, at the back. It was, she realised, only about fifteen minutes' walk from where the Anthonys lived, a fact which, for a moment, deterred her, until she remembered Evelyn having said that they were moving. She had had no word from any of them, except to receive from Evelyn a parcel of books that she had borrowed, returned by post, with no accompanying note.

She left the house-agent's office, after having signed the agreement, with a sense of relief at a decision arrived at, ignoring, or, rather, wilfully embracing all the disadvantages of her new home, its distance from the West End, the inconvenience of returning late at night, what it would cost her in taxi-fares, telling herself that she welcomed them as an inducement to change her mode of living. She would live the life of Mrs. Anthony now; she would give up the struggle gladly.

Doubt assailed her when she returned to the Mews, but she ascribed that only to the hatred for it which she had developed. She would be thankful to be out of it. She could move to Hampstead on January the first; not quite two months, and she would be free. She had told no one of her return home, and had seen almost nobody, refusing all invitations. She spent her time alone, working and reading and walking in Kensington Gardens, trying to beat off the nameless fear that still surrounded her, striving to reassert control over her nerves.

At the end of November Paul's play was produced with great success. The reviews were admirable, and she read them with mixed emotions, struggling to beat down a bitterness which she found almost irresistible. But she wanted to see it, painful though she felt that the experience would be, and went alone to a Tuesday matinée in the second week of the run, sitting at the back of the Dress Circle, where she hoped that she would meet



nobody she knew. She felt sick with apprehension as the curtain rose and the opening lines were spoken, hearing them again in Paul's voice as he had read them to her in Corsica. As the play proceeded she forgot her emotion, growing absorbed in the interest of the performance, but in the interval it recurred, painfully, gripping her with a sense of loss, of having been cheated. The play was beautiful, but its beauty, she felt, belonged to her; she had made him write it, watched over it, helped him with it; but for her it would never have existed; it seemed bitter to be allowed no share in it. Mentally, she compared herself to a mother who sees her illegitimate child grow to manhood and beauty among strangers; she felt the comparison maudlin, like a scene out of *East Lynne*, but she could not escape it. All her memories of New York and of the summer rose up in her again.

In the second interval she left her seat, going outside to smoke, and, in the foyer, found herself face to face with Audrey.

"You!" Audrey came up to her, timidly. "What do you think of it?" she asked eagerly.

"It's beautiful," Elinor told her.

"Isn't it?" Her voice glowed with pride. "I'm so glad you think so. I'm so glad you came. I can't keep away from the theatre. And it's a success, too. Isn't that splendid? You don't know the difference it's made to Paul." The girl's eyes were bright with excitement, and then suddenly she checked herself, coming close to her. "You don't grudge it him?" she whispered.

"Of course not."

"I'm so glad." Audrey slipped her hand in hers for a moment, and then said: "I must go," and left her.

It was six o'clock when Elinor reached home. Mrs. Moggridge had gone, and the flat was empty, sinister in its quiet. She pulled off her hat and sank drearily on to the divan, too listlessly wretched to bother to remove her coat. So Paul was established now, his struggles presumably over; the play's success would bring him money and an easier passage for his later work; she

tried to feel glad of it. She went back to her words with Audrey. "Do I grudge it him?" she asked herself. She did not know; she grudged something, the right to share in it, the right to be proud of him, the power to believe in him, perhaps. She felt horribly lonely, and began to cry, weakly, miserably, unable to stop herself once she had started.

She had no sense of time; she just sat there crying, and then, suddenly, the telephone rang, and at the same instant the front-door bell, the two noises striking against each other jarringly, so that she sprang up, startled, her heart seeming to stop for a moment, as though someone had jumped out on her in the dark. Of a sudden the last of her self-mastery deserted her; she could not move; she could only stand where she was, crying helplessly, shaking all through her body, her hands making weak, impotent gestures towards the telephone, unable to answer it or to go to the door, sobbing to herself: "I can't! I can't!" At last, with an effort that felt like tearing herself out of quicksands, she darted at the instrument whose ringing seemed every moment to grow more menacing, and snatched off the receiver, as though it were something living, like the claw of a lobster. She left it dangling, swinging to and fro, and rushed downstairs to the front door, crying out: "I'm coming! I'm coming!" tearing it open, to reveal Richard standing outside, and then fainted, collapsing in a heap at his feet.

Later, she lay on the divan, leaning back against cushions, gazing at him with a dumb, warm happiness in his presence, almost the only human being she had been glad to see for what seemed months now.

"What are you doing here, Dick?" she asked. "When did you come home?"

"This afternoon. I rang you up, and you were out, but I thought I'd come round on the chance. What was the matter? I've never known you do that before."

"I never have," she answered.

"What was it?"

"Don't bother now. I'll talk some other time. Let me just look at you. You don't know how good it is to see you."

She stretched out her hand and he took it, pressing it gently. She began to cry again, weakly, but happily now.

He stayed with her all the evening, cooking a meal for the two of them while she lay quietly watching him, tending her gently, thoughtfully.

"It's nice to be here again," he said.

"Is it?" she smiled.

"I like this place. I always have."

"I've come to hate it," she answered. "I'm leaving it next month. Tell me about yourself, Dick. Where have you been? Why do you come back now, just when England's at its filthiest?"

"I got home-sick," he replied. "I don't know what for, exactly. London, I think, and foggy afternoons, and wet leaves on the pavements. And this place. I'm sorry you're leaving it. I've thought of it often, as a sort of anchorage. I've got no other. I want one."

"So do I," she said fervently. "But this has ceased to be one for me. I must show you the new flat, though I'm afraid you won't like it."

"Do you?"

"It's what I want," she answered. "At least, I think it is. The nearest I can get, anyway. You'll see. Go on about yourself."

"I got sick of being with exiles," Richard said. "I got afraid of becoming one of them. I was on the point of buying a villa at Fiesole, and then suddenly I got scared, and came rushing home instead. I don't know to what."

"No."

"I've absolutely no plans! I wish to God I knew what I wanted."

"Me, too," said Elinor, wearily.

He came to lunch the next day, and they spent the afternoon together. She felt it good to have him there again, solid and dependable. She tried to tell him something of her troubles, the story of Paul and of Evelyn Anthony.

"It's robbed me of something," she explained. "Courage, I think. Courage to begin again. Belief in myself, too. I don't know what I stand for, any more. I used to know, but I feel that I've forgotten, or that it won't do any longer. I can't go on . . . treading water. I must get back to land, any land."

"I know," he replied. "I felt like that, too, after Brenda died. I still feel like it, as a matter of fact. I've been throwing myself away pretty badly these last months. I've been with the rottenest crowd, pretending I liked them. It ended in a shock for me, too. In Florence, in a gang I'd been playing around with; and I found one of them cheating at poker. That did seem about the last straw. If one couldn't even play games with a sense of security . . . I don't know if I can explain what I mean. It wasn't that I was morally shocked at his cheating; it was just that it seemed as if the last, flimsiest cardboard bottom had gone, as though I'd made poker my last refuge, something that I still wanted to do in life, though God knows it wasn't much, and that even that had given way. Do you know?"

"I know," said Elinor. "It was like the damp here. As if even my flat had gone back on me."

The following afternoon she took him up to Hampstead and showed him the new flat. He went over it with her in silence. Then they came downstairs into the street, misty and veiled with the early ending afternoon, and began to walk.

"Well?" she asked.

"Why, Elinor?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Security," she said. "Look at these houses. Aren't they secure? Don't they stand for something—I don't know what—but . . . regular meals, regular servants . . . something orderly? Don't they?"

He looked in at the window of a house they were passing. A parlour-maid in cap and apron was drawing the blinds; within was a fire and warmth, and solid furniture, and some people having tea.

"Yes, I know," he answered; "I know what you

mean." He proceeded to tell her of his visit to Wembley Park, of how he had stood outside Marjorie's house and thought that she must be happy, living as she did.

"Exactly," Elinor agreed. "And that's why I've taken the flat."

"I know," he assented, "but I don't believe in it. Not for you. I don't want to see you give up like that. It isn't you."

"It's what I want," she cried. "I *want* to give up. Or, rather, not give up, but find something else, something instead of what it's always been. Peace, I think."

"Do you think you *can* find it like this?" he asked. "God knows I understand your wanting it, although I've always thought of you as being marvellously able to dispense with it, as having something inside you that gave you your security—but do you think you *can* get it from without?"

"How else?" she asked. "I've lost the thing within me, if I ever had it at all."

"These houses," he went on. "You say, 'don't they stand for security?' They do; but they're not security in themselves. That's in the people who live in them, who choose them because they stand for what's in *them*, in the people themselves, not because they stand for what they desire. You can't come into them, empty, and find it there, if it's not in you. I don't think it is. I don't think it's in me, though God knows I want it just about as much as you do."

"You're right, Dick," she said, drearily. "At least, I'm afraid you are. But what is one to do? I want *something* to cling on to—a symbol, even if it isn't the real thing. What am I to do?"

"How can I tell you?" he replied, with a little laugh. "Aren't I in the same boat? I've got precious little to cling to, either. You think you can find it in a flat here; I thought I could find it in a person. I couldn't. And now she's dead, I seem to see even less chance. Perhaps it isn't in us, only the desire for it. Or perhaps, for us, it is in another person, only in someone who *wants* it, too. Brenda didn't."

"What do we do about it?" Elinor asked. "Precious few do want it, as far as I can see; or know that they do, anyway. I didn't know, till now . . . or I wouldn't let myself know . . . one or the other. And now it's not so easy to achieve."

"We've got each other," he said, comfortingly. "You mean a lot to me."

"And you to me, Dick."

"I suppose you wouldn't consider . . . marrying me?" he asked. "I don't know . . . but . . . we might make something of it . . . together."

She was silent for a moment, looking before her.

"I know," she said quietly; and then: "*I'd* like it, Dick."

"And I," he answered, equally quietly.

They had reached a main road now, with 'buses passing them. Elinor saw a No. 28, going to Kensington.

"Let's go home," she said.

They climbed to the top of the 'bus.

"I'm not much catch as a husband, I know," he said when they were seated. "A drunk, and an idler . . ."

She smiled, hearing in her head an echo of "Poor dear Elinor."

"Dick, dear," she said gently.

"But we might help each other along," he continued. "There's a lot to be considered, I suppose; your life, your work . . ."

"They go on, anywhere," she smiled.

"Where would you want to live? Out here?"

She shook her head.

"No. That was running away. I know. I shouldn't need that, with you. Anywhere; it doesn't matter. We might travel for a bit; let all this simmer down behind us."

"Yes." He was quiet for a while, envisaging it. "But, my dear, there's another thing. This isn't the end. We're not in love with each other . . . like that. If someone else comes along . . . for you . . .?"

She smiled again, shaking her head.

"I don't think so," she said. "And for you?"

"I want happiness so much more," he answered.

"And I."

"I believe you'd give it me."

There was silence once more between them.

"Well?" he asked at length, turning his head towards her.

"I'd like it," she repeated.

THE END







